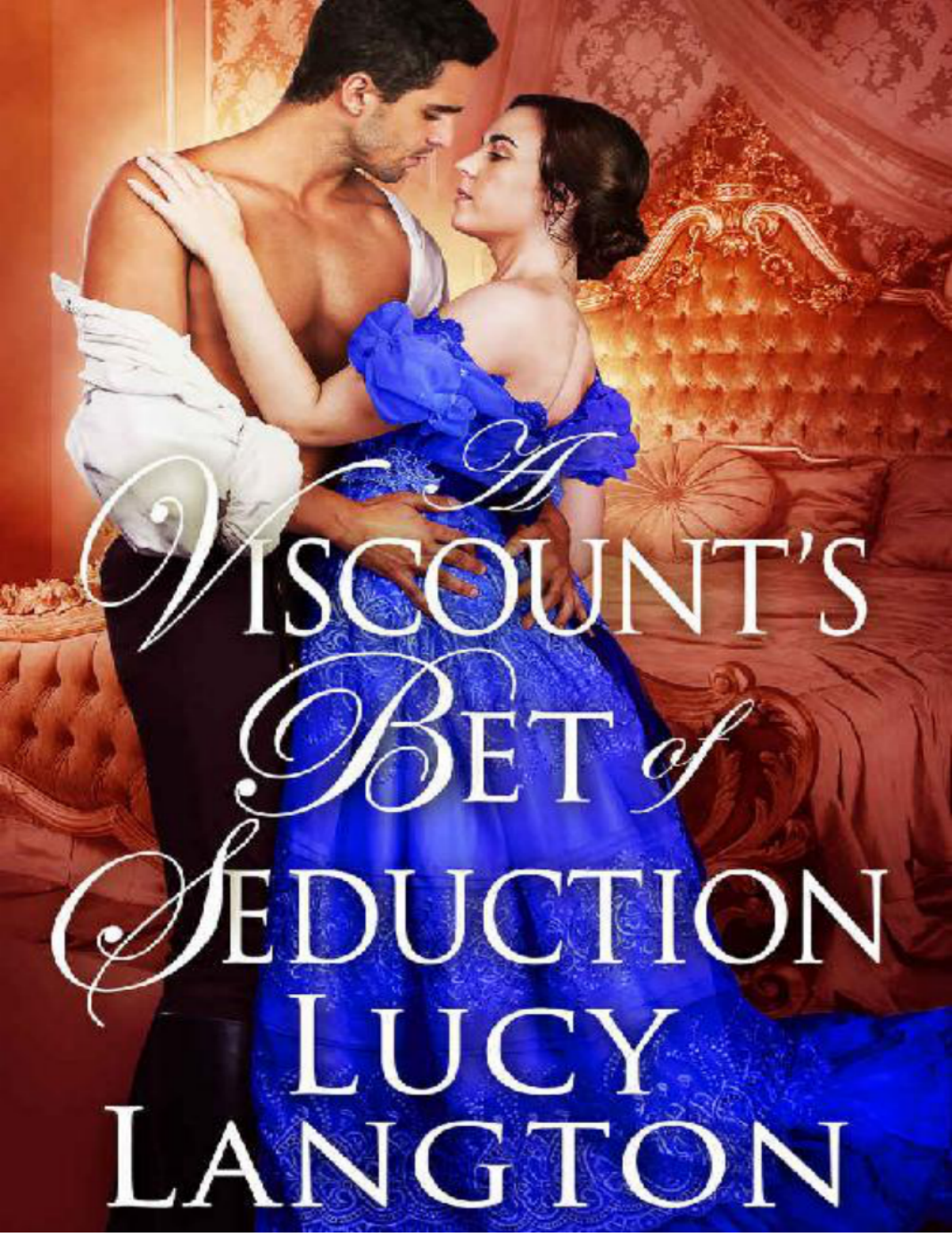

A Viscount's Bet of Seduction
Lucy Langton

A Viscount's Bet of Seduction

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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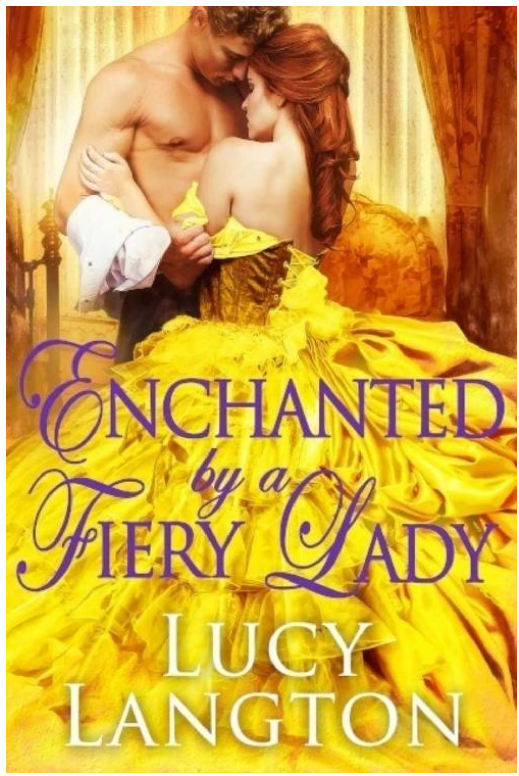
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A Viscount's Bet of Seduction

Introduction

Silas Sweet is the heir to the Viscount of Thornbridge, and a chronic disappointment to his father. His favorite things in life are his bachelorhood and bets. After losing a hunting bet to his friend, Silas has to make Lucy fall in love with him. He is secretly attracted to Lucy already, so he's more than happy to be the one who steals her heart away. Will he manage to win this game of seduction?

Lucy Wilds is a happy spinster who has more opinions than many people think appropriate. She has vowed to never wed, but the moment she meets Silas, she finds herself swept off of her feet. Even though she swore she will be single and happy for life, the undeniable passion she feels will make her lose her mind. But even when Silas proves to be secretive, why does his love still feel like exactly what she needs?

When this pair unites, the temptation is too strong to resist and soon, they find themselves in the ashes of their passion... Until she finds out the truth. Silas will attempt to make amends with Lucy, but this fiery young Lady won't be easy to handle. Will his secret lead to their demise? Or can the fiery Lady find it in her heart to forgive the man who has claimed her body, her mind and soul?

Chapter 1

Miss Lucy Wilds, aged four-and-twenty years, was sitting in the parlour of her London town home, painting a still life. The air was redolent with the rich scents of oil paint and linseed oil. In front of her was a small robin's-egg blue bowl of bright red apples on top of a table, which was covered with a crisp, white cloth.

She dipped her brush into the red paint, mixing it with a little of the oil, then began to fill in the shapes of the apples on the canvas. They were already sketched out in the underpainting, done in shades of raw umber.

She was standing beside the window, for maximum light. The sunlight streaming through was warm on her skin. Outside, there was a brief trill of happy feminine voices. Lucy glanced out of her window to see none other than Miss Susan Hamm walking with a group of young women, all of them dressed in bright colours.

I haven't seen her for at least five years.

Susan was dressed in a lavender silk dress, with a smart Spencer jacket in goldenrod and a matching yellow bonnet. Susan's hair was in dark ringlets, framing her heart-shaped face. Long ago, Lucy presumed that Susan lost interest in continuing their friendship. It was a shame, really. They had been close—bosom friends of the highest order during their school days.

Lucy—dressed in her paint-smudged smock, her brown hair caught in

a plain bun—drew away from the window, stepping into the shadows of the parlour so that should Susan glance up, she wouldn't see her.

Loneliness, sharp and lingering, welled up inside of Lucy. She breathed in deeply, banishing it to the shadows, where it belonged. It had always been difficult for Lucy to make friends, even before her parents had died, leaving her to be cared for by her spinster aunt, Joan Wilds.

Lucy loved reading and having conversations about literature and politics. Additionally, she felt awkward around people, like she didn't quite fit in. The frosty reception she experienced at parties when she offered her opinion made things even worse.

The two women rarely mixed with other people. There wasn't the money for fancy clothes or tickets to assembly balls or the theatre, even if they had wanted to go. Lucy and Aunt Joan were allowed use of the townhouse, as well as a modest income from her father's estate. They lived simply and quietly. They were both, for the most part, content.

Lucy glanced down. She was wearing a simple grey muslin under her smock—nothing so fancy as Susan's elegant dress and smart jacket. She knew that, as Lucy was no longer a prosperous tradesman's daughter, Susan's interest in being friends had slowly waned.

While Lucy and Susan had had rousing discussions, Susan had, more and more, wanted to build friendships among society. Susan could do that—her father was still alive (as far as Lucy knew) and was looking for an equally rich man to marry his daughter.

Lucy herself didn't have the luxury of looking for a match. She had,

several years before, fancied herself in love, only to find that he, too, had grown tired of her. If it weren't for Lucy's father's bequest, she and Aunt Joan would have been destitute. They made sure to make it last. During her parents' lifetimes, the house had had several servants. However, the two women preferred to cook and keep house for themselves.

Lucy heard the sound of her Aunt Joan's footsteps, coming down the hall. She turned toward the door, which was open, just in time to see her aunt enter the room.

"A letter has arrived by special courier," Aunt Joan said, waving an already opened letter in the air. Her aunt was dressed in a sombre black bombazine, her grey-streaked hair pulled back in a severe bun, with several curled ringlets framing her cheeks.

Lucy set her brush and palette down on the table beside the bowl of apples as she met her aunt in the centre of the room.

"Who is it from?" she asked, holding out a hand to accept the letter. It was on thick, creamy paper. The handwriting was almost an art form, with its careful flourishes.

"The widower of my old friend, Lady Thornbridge," Aunt Joan told her with excitement. "Lord Josiah Sweet, the Viscount of Thornbridge, has offered to host us at his county seat."

Lucy perused the letter's content. Aunt Joan had been friends with the viscount's wife, who had passed five years prior. The two had rarely seen each other, but Lady Amelia Sweet, the Viscountess of Thornbridge, and Aunt Joan had had a regular correspondence and a friendship that spanned several decades. They had met during their

days at a fancy manners school for young ladies. As the daughter of a wealthy tradesman, Aunt Joan had been able to attend.

"Aunt Joan," Lucy said, looking up from the letter, "this is for a four-day long party." Lucy's antisocial leanings were sounding their alarm bells. Aunt Joan beamed at her.

"Yes! To celebrate Miss Dinah Sweet, Amelia's only daughter—and, I imagine, to find her a suitable husband."

"She came out three years ago, did she not?" Lucy recalled Aunt Joan telling her about it. After his wife's passing, Lord Thornbridge wrote to Aunt Joan in her stead. Though infrequent, the correspondence was a comfort to Lucy's aunt, who missed her friend terribly.

"Indeed," Aunt Joan agreed. "Miss Sweet will turn two-and-twenty this coming September. Lord Thornbridge is trying to secure her a good marriage, and soon. At one-and-twenty, it's getting to be critical."

Most ladies were wed by twenty. To be unmarried at two-and-twenty was considered to be late. Lucy herself had given up hope years prior, and found herself to be content with the decision. After all, she and Aunt Joan were comfortable and fulfilled.

"Can't I stay in London while you go?" Lucy asked, hoping to get out of it.

"Socializing will be good for you," Aunt Joan said stoutly. "Before winter comes and we two are shut away by bad weather. We get few

invitations as it is."

"Please, Aunt Joan," Lucy begged. "Let me stay here." She already knew, by the set of her aunt's shoulders—she planned for Lucy to accompany her.

"Lucy, I cannot afford to have you out in Society much," Aunt Joan said. "You, too, will need to begin to consider making as advantageous a match as possible."

"Aunt Joan—" Lucy murmured, scandalized, but one look from her aunt silenced her.

"I myself know how difficult it is to remain unmarried, and to rely on the goodness of others to help one support oneself." Aunt Joan sighed, smiling at her niece warmly. "It will be a good chance to perhaps secure yourself a husband. After all, four-and-twenty is not too late."

"Won't it be mostly members of the ton?" Lucy pointed out.

"Who said that an intelligent and accomplished woman such as yourself isn't worthy of an advantageous match?"

Lucy sighed. She knew that she couldn't fight against her aunt, who had made sure that she was taken care of ever since her parents had died in a carriage accident almost ten years ago. Lucy had never told Aunt Joan that she didn't plan to marry. Nor did she have the heart to. Her aunt loved her. She couldn't see how Lucy didn't fit in with anyone. Aunt Joan was utterly blind to Lucy's faults, and as such believed that she could marry any man or gentleman that she set her

sights on.

“I’m going to write back to Viscount Thornbridge immediately, to let him know that we will certainly be in attendance!”

Lucy watched her aunt leave the room. She knew it hadn’t been easy for Aunt Joan, who had never married. She had always had to depend on the kindness of her relatives. When Lucy’s parents had died, Aunt Joan had stepped in, and they had both lived on the small income that her father’s estate had left for their care.

She knew that her aunt only wanted what was best for her. But Lucy enjoyed their life, now. She didn’t want to marry. Men, or gentlemen, for that matter, could not be trusted. After the ink was dry on the paper, a woman had very few choices but to do as her lord and master said. Lucy meant to be her own mistress.

She turned back to her painting. The apples were beginning to look like perfectly red jewels, as if one could reach into the painting, pick one up, and take a bite. She knew she had talents, but she’d had the misfortune of being born female. Thus, she could only be accomplished—never an actual artist.

Lucy could read, write, and draw. She could speak four languages, and she had opinions on everything, from the arts to politics. She knew that she had been prepared to be a wife, and that disappointed her. Aunt Joan would be sad if they didn’t go to Lord Thornbridge’s estate. Aunt Joan so rarely asked Lucy for anything, that she would have to acquiesce.

Chapter 2

It was a glorious sunny day. Overhead, the sky was an almost impossible shade of blue, without a single cloud. The foliage in the woods was bright green, rustling as a warm summer breeze blew through the leaves and the horses' hooves thundered over the soft green grass. The hounds were baying. Before them, the magnificent buck sprang through the trees.

The buck's antlers were wide, like chandeliers, and his brown russet coat was sleek. He was fast, too.

Silas Sweet, the eldest son and heir of the Viscount of Thornbridge, urged his large black thoroughbred onward. He leaned low over Black Jack's sleek coal-coloured neck, winding his fingers into the horse's mane. Silas had been trying to catch the buck all summer, to no avail. Not only was he fast, he was good at giving them the slip.

The hounds suddenly paused, and he brought his horse to a halt. His friend, Levi Wilmington, the grandson and heir of the Baron of Dartmoor, soon caught up. He pulled his bay hunter to a halt.

"Seems they've lost the scent," Silas mused.

"Bad luck." Levi pulled his top hat off, running his fingers through his mop of brown hair.

They both sent their horses forward at a walk, the hounds all moving slowly in front of them.

“Here, I thought we were sure to catch him,” Levi said.

“It looks like we return home empty-handed, yet again.” Silas sighed heavily as Black Jack danced nervously beneath him. The buck had led them on a mad dash, only to escape at the last moment. Silas was beginning to think that the buck was some sort of forest spirit—one that could vanish into thin air at the drop of a hat.

They turned their horses towards home, ordering the dogs to follow them.

“I imagine we’ll be having quite the group out with us soon,” Levi mused.

“Any day now, the guests will be arriving for the party,” Silas agreed. “My father wants to marry my sister off as soon as possible.”

“Naturally,” Levi said. “Dinah’s a very kind-hearted lady. She deserves only the best.” Silas knew that Levi and Dinah were like brother and sister. Otherwise, he might have suggested the match himself.

“According to my father, it will be the party of the decade. Anything for Dinah, of course. Only the best.” Silas was grinning.

They both laughed. Ever since Dinah’s birth, the Viscount of

Thornbridge had been wrapped around her tiny finger. Dinah was doted on not only by her dear Papa, but her two brothers, as well.

As the two gentlemen urged their horses into a canter in the direction of Thornbridge Manor, Silas thought about the party. It would be a four-day long extravaganza. He was looking forward to meeting all of the ladies that would be there. He planned to steal kisses, and perhaps, have a small dalliance or two, as was his wont.

It had been months since his last, back in London, during the Season. He was ready for something—someone new. Though he had no plans to marry. Not ever.

Silas loved his freedom. He couldn't imagine being trapped in a passionless marriage, having to always sneak his dalliances. So, he planned to remain single, forever. He figured his father would eventually change his mind, then make Silas' younger brother his heir. Michael planned to marry, after all. It was the perfect solution for everyone.

As Silas and Levi arrived at the stables of Thornbridge Manor, a familiar barouche-landau was also pulling into the drive. It was pulled by a perfectly matched pair of Norfolk Trotters, both of them black as midnight. The door to the carriage was opened by a footman, and Silas' brother, Michael, climbed out.

"I say! Is no one here to greet me?" he asked. Michael had been to London, to check on the family's business investments. He was the only child of Lord and Lady Thornbridge to look like their mother, with his chestnut-coloured hair and hazel eyes. Silas and Dinah both

had black hair and blue eyes, like their father.

"We're here, old chap!" Silas said, clasping his brother's hand. "You're just in time for Dinah's party."

"I hope you're planning on behaving yourself this time?" Michael asked, raising an eyebrow. "It's for our sister's future and well-being, you know. It's not an event that's being arranged just so you can have an excuse to drink and chase skirts."

Silas laughed, throwing his head back. He patted his younger brother on the shoulder. "Of course not." He wanted what was best for Dinah, and knew that at one-and-twenty, it was almost past time for her to be wed. What was more, she wanted to be married.

He and Levi shared a glance. Levi's lips were quirked upwards, trying not to smile. Levi had known Silas since their school days. Neither of them had changed much.

The three gentlemen walked inside of Thornbridge Manor, where the butler informed them that the midday meal was about to be served. So, they headed up to the dining room.

Their father, Lord Thornbridge, and their sister, Dinah, were already seated. Both stood as the others joined them at the table.

"You're late," Dinah said, smiling sardonically. She was dressed in a white muslin. Her black hair was arranged in a bun, with ringlets framing her cheeks.

“Nice of you both to wait for us,” Silas replied.

“How is London, Michael?” their father asked as he settled his cloth napkin onto his lap.

“Busy and bustling, as usual,” Michael replied. “All of our accounts are healthy, so I would say that the trip was a success.” He sliced into his veal cutlet. Before he took a bite, he looked at his father. “How are the plans for the party going?”

“Almost complete,” Lord Thornbridge said, beaming at his only daughter. “It will be the perfect summer gathering. We’ll make sure to find our Dinah a proper gentleman husband.”

She blushed. Dinah had debuted three years ago, during the London Season. She had not found a husband the past several winters, but their father was determined to find a suitable one for her by the end of the summer. She would turn two-and-twenty in September. They all wanted Dinah to be happily married, thus the wait.

“Do you all recall the treasure hunts that I used to arrange for all of you while you were children?” their father asked. He took a bite of his veal, chewing with clear relish.

“How could we forget?” Silas asked, with a laugh. Lord Thornbridge had created epic hunts for his children, with a long list of clues that took them on wild adventures throughout the estate.

The door opened and the butler, Mr. Fort, barely had a moment to announce their guest when he entered himself, barging in as he usually did.

"Mr. Percy Stalton," Mr. Fort said quickly.

Percy Stalton was the heir of a rich tobacco merchant, who had recently purchased a nearby estate. Silas and Levi had been spending time with him over the past year. He was tall, with dark hair and brown eyes; he thought himself handsome. Percy was a true rake. Silas merely dabbled.

"You're early," Silas said. He glanced around at the table. Everyone was smiling, though they all looked disappointed. The family didn't particularly like Percy Stalton. They always treated him with politeness, as they treated everyone else—something he took advantage of.

"Naturally," Percy replied. "I wouldn't miss the party for the world." His eyes went to Dinah, who looked down at her food. Silas's own skin crawled at the thought of Percy Stalton attempting to woo his sister.

"Have a seat," Lord Thornbridge said. "We're just having luncheon."

Percy grinned, and took his seat as the servants rushed to set a place for him. Everyone sat, eating their food, the sound of the cutlery clinking on the plates.

It's going to be a very long weekend, Silas thought to himself. *Especially since it's already beginning*.

Chapter 3

Aunt Joan was dozing on the seat just across from Lucy. The journey from London had taken them two days, and it had been an exhausting trip. They had taken a coach from London to the small village of Shere, where the viscount had had his very own barouche-landau meet them for the last leg of the journey. Aunt Joan had been vastly excited to have her first ride in the sleek black carriage—with a perfectly-matched pair, no less!

She had completely exhausted herself, and had been asleep for the past hour while Lucy watched the green fields and rolling hills of the countryside pass by outside of the window.

The carriage was just pulling into the long drive, which led to the viscount's estate. She gasped at the sight before her.

"Aunt Joan!" Lucy said. "Look."

Aunt Joan shook off her sleep, then peered eagerly out the window. "Oh! It's so beautiful, is it not?"

The viscount's manor was a grand four-storey sandstone building, with many windows that glittered in the sun. There was a lake in front of the house, which was nestled into the countryside like a jewel. In the fields that surrounded it grazed fine, sleek horses, their tails swishing lazily back and forth. They were majestic animals, in shades of brown and black.

“I haven’t been here in nearly ten years,” Aunt Joan said, sadly. Lucy smiled at her aunt. She knew that she missed her friend greatly.

Lucy felt incredibly nervous, her stomach twisting in ways that she’d never known that it could. She was dressed in a simple grey frock, a black Spencer jacket, and a straw bonnet with a black ribbon, tied in a neat bow underneath her chin. She glanced down at her hands, folded in her lap. Her kid gloves were getting worn at the fingertips.

Someone will notice, she thought wryly. *I hope they don’t hold it against me*. Lucy was fully prepared to not be liked. *After all, why get my hopes up?*

When the carriage stopped in front of the house, a tall older gentleman and a young lady were waiting to greet them, along with the members of the household staff. They both had the same black hair and blue eyes.

This must be the viscount and his daughter.

The gentleman walked to the carriage, offering his hand to Aunt Joan, just as one of the footmen opened the door to let both women out.

“Miss Wilds,” he said, “it’s so kind of you to come all this way.”

“Lord Thornbridge!” Aunt Joan exclaimed. “Thank you for your invitation. This is my niece, Miss Lucy Wilds.”

The viscount held out his hand to help Lucy down. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said.

“Thank you, My Lord,” she murmured.

“This is my daughter, Miss Dinah Sweet,” he said, and the women all curtsied to each other.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Miss Sweet said. “Unfortunately, my brothers are not at home, but they will be soon.”

“Come,” Lord Thornbridge urged them. “We will get you both settled in your rooms, and then, perhaps, my daughter can show you around the house.”

“I would love to see the gardens,” Lucy murmured.

“Then you must,” Miss Sweet said, smiling. Lucy smiled back at her. Miss Sweet seemed very kind, though Lucy suspected that they hadn’t much in common. She was relieved that Aunt Joan would be there, to act as a buffer. Aunt Joan could always be depended upon to get along with everyone else—and to keep up a steady stream of polite conversation.

Lucy had unpacked her trunk, putting all of her dresses into the large hardwood armoire that stood in her room. She and Aunt Joan had been offered the use of Miss Sweet's lady's maid, but they had declined. Neither of them was used to being waited upon.

"Aunt Joan?" Lucy called out. She knocked on the door which joined her room to her aunt's.

"Come in, Lucy."

Lucy opened the door, peering into her aunt's room. It was the same as her own—decorated with a lush silk wallpaper in a deep royal blue, with a dark mahogany bed and matching armoire. A mustard-coloured duvet covered the bed, and an oil painting of a woodland scene hung over the fireplace.

"Are you going to accompany me to the gardens with Miss Sweet?" Lucy asked.

"I think I may take a nap," Aunt Joan said. She did look tired after their long journey, but Lucy didn't want to go alone. Her aunt usually kept up a long stream of discussion, allowing Lucy to fade into the background.

"Please, Aunt Joan," Lucy said. "I'll have nothing to talk to her about."

"Of course, you will!" Aunt Joan said. "You just have to find out what the two of you have in common."

“I care nothing for fancy parties or fashion,” Lucy pointed out. After all, what would a fine lady have to do with an ordinary woman of modest means? And an orphan, no less! Young, fashionable ladies who were recently debuted were interested in fashion, the London Season, and gossip of the ton, all things that Lucy had no interest in or experience with.

“Then talk to her about things that you do care about,” Aunt Joan said, sitting down on the bed. “Just be yourself, Lucy.”

“I’ll let you rest,” Lucy said, resigning herself to going alone.

“When you return, please wake me,” Aunt Joan said. “I want to have enough time to dress before dinner.”

“Of course.”

Lucy left the rooms, walking to the parlour to meet Miss Sweet. Together, the two young ladies headed outside. Lucy wished that her aunt would have come—she didn’t think she would have much in common with Miss Sweet.

“The pond was put in by my father,” Miss Sweet explained, cutting into Lucy’s agitated train of thought. “The gardens were my mother’s doing. She loved the flowers. She spent a great deal of time fixing them to look just as she envisioned.”

Lucy looked at the lush cornucopia of flower beds—there were lilies, roses, and hydrangeas, surrounded by fruit trees and neatly trimmed

box hedges. A grey stone path led through it, winding lazily through the foliage.

"It's beautiful," Lucy murmured, her artist's eyes drinking in the sight. The late Lady Thornbridge certainly had an eye for detail. The colours all blended into a picture of exquisite profusion.

Lucy inhaled, smelling the sweet scent of the flowers. The air out here in the countryside was much fresher than that of the city, though she didn't say so. It hadn't the smells that London did.

"It's the best place to sit and read," Miss Sweet told her. "Of a morning, I like to bring my book here, to this bench." The wooden bench was made of sleek ash. Lucy glanced around. It was so quiet and peaceful. The soft sound of the wind, twining its fingers through the leaves, was all that she heard.

"I imagine it would be," she commented, her curiosity piqued by Miss Sweet's comment about reading. "What are you reading right now?"

"*Robinson Crusoe*."

Lucy looked at Miss Sweet, astonished. "I love that book," she confessed, realizing that she had underestimated Miss Sweet.

"Do you really?" Dinah grinned. "I find it terribly exciting."

"As do I!"

“To think, anyone at all could find themselves stranded on a desert island,” Miss Sweet commented. “It’s good to know how to survive.”

“True,” Lucy murmured. “I always felt a little akin to Mr. Crusoe. I felt as though I’ve had to survive in a world that’s a little bit hostile to a person like me.” What she meant was, an orphan.

Miss Sweet nodded. “I, too, have felt that way. If you’re female, then you must survive in a world run by gentlemen.”

“That’s true,” Lucy mused, finding the conversation to her liking. “I’d much rather be allowed to call myself an artist and a scholar, rather than merely being considered accomplished.”

“As have I,” Miss Sweet admitted eagerly. Lucy realized that she had just met a potential friend, if their friendship could survive the long weekend.

Then came the sound of horses’ hooves, clopping on the hardpacked dirt of the drive. Both of them turned to see two gentlemen getting out of a very fancy barouche-landau.

One was extremely handsome, even from a distance. He had black hair and was dressed in a midnight blue frock coat, which showed off his broad shoulders. His breeches were pale cream, and his boots shone. The other was brunet, similar in height, but with less of the attraction of his companion.

“My brothers have arrived,” Miss Sweet said, raising her hand and waving to them.

Lucy swallowed and nodded. She didn’t dare ask anything more. To do so would be to betray her decided attraction to the one.

Chapter 4

Silas and Michael had gone into town and were just returning. They both climbed out of the carriage, their boots crunching in the gravel of the drive.

“I presume that the blackberries are ripe for the picking?” Michael asked.

“Yes. Father and I checked just this morning,” Silas replied. “We can have baskets for all of the guests, and then we’ll have them sent to the kitchen so Mrs. Larson can fix us blackberry compote for dessert.”

They had discussed plans for the party on their ride. Silas was beginning to grow weary of it.

“You know,” Michael mused. “This weekend might not only prove profitable for Dinah.”

“What do you mean?” Silas glanced at his brother as they walked to the front door of Thornbridge Manor.

“It could provide you with the opportunity to find a wife, as well,” Michael said.

“I have no interest in marriage,” Silas reminded him. “I am rather enjoying my bachelorhood.” At thirty years old, he had thought that everyone had given up on his marrying. After all, Michael would be a fine future viscount.

“You’re the eldest son and heir of a viscount,” Michael pointed out. “It’s your job to ensure there’s an heir to follow you.”

Silas grimaced at his brother. Michael just had to remind him. He wished he could just let the estate go to the children of one of his siblings. It would solve the matter of Silas having to wed at all.

When he glanced away from Michael, he spotted Dinah standing in the gardens with a young woman whom he had never seen before. Dinah raised her hand and waved, and he returned the gesture. He briefly thought how pretty the woman looked before he followed Michael through the front door.

The two brothers went up to the study, where they found their father having a glass of brandy. He smiled at them, settling even further back into his chair, so that the leather creaked.

“How goes it?” he asked them. “Guests have begun to arrive. Your mother’s dearest friend and her niece have gotten here.”

“All is well,” Michael said, pouring himself a glass. “I was just telling Silas that this weekend might produce him a bride, as well.”

“And I was reminding Michael that I have no plans to marry as of yet.” Silas glared at his brother, who said nothing but handed him a

glass of brandy.

"You're thirty, Silas," his father said. "You are my eldest son and heir to the viscountcy. People are beginning to talk about how unsavoury it is that you aren't married, nor have any interest in finding a wife."

Silas sighed, looking out the window. The sun gleamed on the surface of the lake, turning it silver. "This is indeed true." He had heard the whispers, himself.

Why marry, though, when being a bachelor is such fun?

"I have a good deal to leave my sons when I pass," his father said. "I should like to think that you are all sharing the wealth with a family and creating heirs who will carry on our legacy."

"Michael is doing an excellent job of it," Silas pointed out. His brother was engaged to be married. Lady Arabella was a genteel sort of lady who would make an excellent viscountess. When Silas turned away from the window, his father was frowning at him.

"I expect you to marry," he said flatly. "I suggest you start thinking about it seriously, and soon."

Silas sighed in disappointment. He loved his father very much and hated to let him down. But he also loved his freedom. He didn't want to be chained down—to put up with one lady who expected him to be faithful to her. Silas's heart was a wild thing, one which loved capriciously. He didn't want to hurt anyone, and he also didn't want to feel trapped, himself.

Chapter 5

As the day progressed, more guests arrived. Many had travelled from all over England, so much of the house was filled. Thornbridge Manor had four wings, and all of the bedrooms were full of guests.

Lucy had never lived in such a crowded building before. She had always lived in the tiny home in London. First, with her parents and Aunt Joan, and now, with only Aunt Joan and herself.

What surprised her was that she couldn't hear anyone moving around. Even footsteps were hushed by the thick carpeting in the hallways. Sometimes, one would hear snippets of conversation as two people walked past, but that was all.

Lucy sat at the vanity in her room, using an iron to curl her hair. She had pinned it back into a neat, but elegant chignon. She considered how she had expected Thornbridge Manor to be drafty and echoing, but that was not at all the case. It was luxuriously comfortable.

She was wearing her peignoir, waiting for her aunt to help her with her corset and then the buttons of her dress.

There was a knock on the door that separated Lucy's room from Aunt Joan's. Lucy recognized her aunt's gentle knock immediately.

"Come in, Aunt Joan," she called out. Her aunt peered through the

door.

“Do you need any help dressing?” Aunt Joan asked.

“Yes, please, Aunt Joan.”

Lucy took off her peignoir, and Aunt Joan helped her lace her corset. Lucy then stepped into her dress for the evening, slipping her arms into the short, bell-like sleeves.

She turned so her aunt could do up the buttons on the back of her green muslin dress.

“There. You look as pretty as a picture.” Aunt Joan stepped back. “Are you ready to head down?”

Lucy sighed. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” The thought of the crowd, which was slowly growing larger, was intimidating. Her mind went to Miss Sweet’s brother—the handsome one. Her pulse raced a little at the thought of meeting him.

She and Aunt Joan went down to the parlour, where the guests were gathering to await the announcement of dinner. The parlour was a large room, decorated in white silk flocked wallpaper, a pale-yellow carpet, and dark cherry furniture. Over the fireplace hung a beautiful painting, which looked to be Flemish—of wild game, vegetables and fruits, on a black background. Lucy’s eyes feasted on the rich canvas.

Miss Sweet smiled, waving them both over. She was dressed in a beautiful cornflower blue silk gown, which brought out the blue of her eyes. She was standing with both of her brothers. Up close, both of gentlemen had their attractions.

They were dressed similarly, in dark navy frock coats, white linen shirts, cream-coloured breeches, and tall black boots. Lucy's heart raced as she took in the one man's deep blue eyes, as well as the fine line of his jaw and his well-formed lips, which were quirked upward in a grin.

"I want you both to make the acquaintance of Miss Joan Wilds, our mother's good friend, as well as her niece, Miss Lucy Wilds," Miss Sweet said.

Lucy and Aunt Joan curtsied, while both gentlemen bowed to them gallantly.

"These are my brothers, the Honourable Mr Silas Sweet, as well as the Honourable Mr Michael Sweet."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Mr Michael Sweet smiled at them pleasantly. He was the one with the brunet hair. He didn't look much like his siblings. Lucy's eyes gravitated towards the other brother, who was regarding her curiously.

Mr Silas Sweet, Lucy thought to herself, wondering what was going on behind his handsome countenance. She couldn't tell, though was deeply intrigued. She looked away from him, focusing on her aunt.

“And yours,” Aunt Joan said politely. “Your mother kept me apprised of all of your doings while you were all growing up.”

Lucy could feel Mr Silas Sweet’s gaze on her. For a while, she ignored it, but he continued to watch her. She finally dared to meet it, and when she did, she felt an electric charge. Her cheeks went bright crimson. He was gazing at her with a burning look in his blue eyes. Slowly, he smiled.

She raised an eyebrow. Her heart fluttered, an occurrence which had only happened once before in her life. *Do not think of him. Not now. You know how feelings like this end, and it’s not well.*

“Our mother spoke very highly of you, Miss Wilds,” Mr Michael Sweet said. Aunt Joan blushed, smiling beatifically. Lucy was silent. She didn’t want to ruin this weekend for Aunt Joan, who was having the time of her life.

She was shocked when Mr Silas Sweet stepped nearer to her, as Aunt Joan, Mr Michael Sweet and Miss Sweet all began to discuss the late Lady Thornbridge.

“I saw you, earlier, in the garden with my sister,” he said, his voice as smooth and melodic as honey.

“Yes. She was showing me around.”

“Did you find everything to your liking?”

“I did.”

“Good.”

She looked at him. He was studying her with interest, something which didn’t happen often. She, herself, was similarly interested in him.

“I would like to go out and sketch them while I’m here, but I daresay I’ll be too busy with the festivities.”

“Miss Wilds, you sound almost disappointed,” he said, smiling.

“I’m not much in the habit of attending four-day-long parties,” she admitted. It was leaving her feeling worn out, just thinking about it. Miss Sweet had told her what they had planned, and it sounded as though there would hardly be any sort of down time. Lucy wasn’t sure how she’d manage it.

“Then leave it to me,” he assured her. “I’ll make sure that you have an enjoyable time.”

She couldn’t help but grin. The way that he said it promised far more than just dancing and conversing. There was the promise of something extra, something only he could provide her.

The gong was rung for dinner, and Mr Sweet offered her his arm. She

slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, allowing him to lead her into the dining room. She could feel the hard muscle of his arm, smell the masculine, spicy scent of him. It was heady and intoxicating.

Luckily, Silas' father had allowed dinner on the first evening to be a seat-oneself affair, eschewing name cards in favour of something more organic. Silas happily positioned himself next to the stunning younger Miss Wilds.

Miss Wilds was enchanting. She was intelligent, with a sharp wit. He had never met anyone like her before and was already having designs upon her. He thought of showing her around the darkened hallways of Thornbridge Manor—the little alcoves that he knew well.

I'm disappointed that Dinah's already shown her the gardens. It might have been a most amusing place to seduce the younger Miss Wilds.

"And how are you enjoying the white soup, Miss Wilds?" he asked.

"It is delicious," she murmured wryly.

"Is there something the matter?" He discerned the note of disapproval in her tone.

"Is that all that you have to talk about?" she asked him. "The soup, the weather, the party?"

“Hardly!” He laughed. “What do you usually enjoy discussing?”

“Well, the country is at war, Mr Sweet. We’re doing battle in two separate theatres. There’s plenty to discuss on that front. I mean, wartime taxation has been quite a burden on us common folk.”

“Politics! At the dinner table,” he mused. “How positively refreshing and scandalous, Miss Wilds.” He was surprised. It was not often that one ran into a feminine firebrand. She blushed, roses coming into her cheeks. Her brown eyes sparkled. They reminded him of tiger’s eye stones—brown, with flecks of golden in them.

“Miss Wilds and I had a rousing discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*,” Dinah said, cutting in. She was sitting to Silas’ right.

“*Robinson Crusoe*?” He was impressed. Miss Wilds was able to converse on politics and literature. Usually, it was the insipid discussions of ordinary observations that ladies wanted to discuss, as he had been attempting to do.

Miss Wilds was not a lady—she was not of the ton at all, he recalled. So, she wasn’t likely to have been pursuing those things because she was trying to garner a husband, but instead for her own amusement.

“It’s my favourite book,” Miss Wilds said. “Although Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* is quite rousing as well.”

“Is that so?” He hadn’t read it. “What’s it about?”

“She’s poor, and she steals whatever she feels like. She becomes very rich, but keeps losing everything. She’s incredibly intelligent, but not financially smart. She’s nearly a pirate in the way that she’s able to steal whatever she needs, whenever she feels like it.”

He guffawed.

“What, pray tell, is so amusing, Mr Sweet?” Miss Patricia Weaver was tilting her head to the side curiously. Silas knew that she had, at one time, had designs on him. Silas had been interested, though it hadn’t gone past minor flirtation. Now, though, he was absolutely wrapped within Miss Wilds’ spell.

“*Moll Flanders*,” Miss Wilds said. “And piracy.”

Miss Weaver looked disconcerted. “I haven’t the time to read books,” she said. “I’m always so busy visiting.”

“And I haven’t the time to go visiting,” Miss Wilds countered, smiling. “I’m always so busy reading. How curious!” Miss Weaver and Miss Wilds both laughed.

Silas raised an eyebrow. He was impressed. It could have been a social faux-pas, which she’d turned into a clever joke.

“Very impressive, Miss Wilds,” he whispered.

“I have often repelled many by my abrasive manner,” she replied sadly. “I’ve learned how to soften it a little.”

He turned his gaze towards his plate, for he knew he was staring. She was surprising. Usually, Silas was used to women and ladies dissembling—they were always happy, always smiling, always unfailingly polite. Miss Wilds was none of those things.

He liked her.

Dinner was a lavish affair, with six courses. Lucy was so full by the end of it that she was surprised they hadn’t all fallen asleep. It was the most delicious food she’d ever eaten. There was soup, and duck, and roast potatoes. For dessert, there was a lavish cake, topped with a chocolate ganache and with a raspberry syrup in its centre.

The whole room was filled with people—mostly members of the ton; however, there were also members of the nouveau riche. Lucy couldn’t help but feel that she and Aunt Joan were out of place. But it was clear that her aunt was having a good time.

Mr Silas Sweet talked to Lucy throughout, with Miss Sweet adding input from the other side of him. For the most part, Lucy enjoyed the discussion, though Mr Sweet seemed to find her amusing. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was laughing at her.

When the whole party left the dining room, heading for the parlour, Miss Sweet caught Lucy's attention, sidling up to her.

"Miss Wilds," she said. "Can I perhaps prevail upon you to join me at the pianoforte? I'll need someone to turn the pages for me."

Lucy grinned at her new friend. "I would be happy to, Miss Sweet."

"Good. And you must call me Dinah."

"Only if you call me Lucy."

"Deal."

The two young ladies walked over to the instrument made of cherrywood, which shone in the candlelight. While Dinah sat down on the bench, Lucy stood beside her, turning the pages.

Dinah was a soft soprano singer, and she played excellently. When Lucy turned to look at those gathered, everyone's eyes were on Dinah. Except for Mr Silas Sweet.

Across the room, their eyes locked. Lucy felt a pleasant tingle across her skin. He raised his glass to her, and her face grew hot as she blushed furiously. She turned her attention quickly to her task at hand.

She could still feel the heat of his gaze on her. She felt a warm flash in the bottom of her belly. He was good-looking, certainly, and he'd seemed to take pleasure in their conversation. But was he doing this as a lark?

Chapter 6

Later that night, Silas, Percy, and Levi were awake, having a drink in the library. Silas was full and warm, with a pleasant buzz resulting from the good brandy he'd had.

"It's been a good first night," Levi commented.

"Indeed," Silas said, his mind immediately going to the younger Miss Wilds. She was very beautiful. She'd worn a simple muslin dress, in a soft green colour. On her, it was very handsome, bringing out the chestnut in her brown hair and the golden highlights in her eyes.

"There are a good many handsome ladies among the group," Percy added.

"There are. And Dinah seemed to have a good talk with the Marquess of Browning," Levi added.

"I think the two of them would make a fine match." The Marquess of Browning was a good gentleman. His estate was close by, which made him an even better prospect for Dinah, who was very close with her family.

Silas heard the sounds of footsteps in the hallway. He glanced towards the open doorway in time to see Miss Patricia Weaver pass by on her way to her room in the East Wing. She was dressed in a very eye-

catching red silk gown, which enhanced the copper of her hair.

When Silas looked towards Percy, there was a glint in his eye. Percy finished his brandy, then set the glass aside.

“Excuse me,” he said, then walked out of the room, following Miss Weaver.

He’s quite the womanizer. I wonder if Miss Weaver requires a saviour?

Silas suspected that Percy would become overly flirtatious in his pursuit of Miss Weaver, and perhaps handsy in a very ungentlemanly manner.

He glanced over to Levi.

“I’m going to go and make sure Miss Weaver is all right,” he said.

Levi nodded. “A good idea.” He tipped his glass to his lips, turning away from Silas as he went to the window to look out at the lake in the night. For the party, several torches had been lit along the drive, and the light glittered over the dark water.

Silas left the library, heading up the stairs, then down the hall to the East Wing. He heard their voices echoing in the corridor, followed by Miss Weaver’s laugh.

They both turned at his approach. Miss Weaver smiled at him. She was leaning back against the wall, while Percy was just edging in closer. Percy's smile was false—his eyes betrayed his disappointment.

"The Honourable Mr Sweet!" Miss Weaver said. "What are you doing here?" Her cheeks were rosy, her smile coy.

"I was just coming to check on Percy," he explained, concern in his tone. "I wanted to see if he'd seen the physician yet for that rash… down there." He raised his eyebrows in concern, grimacing.

"Oh my," Miss Weaver said. "I'll let the two of you discuss."

She scurried away. The sound her bedroom door opened and closed softly.

Percy glared at Silas. "What was that?" he demanded.

"Once you start treating women better, then I won't have to protect them from you."

"You're one to talk," Percy shot back, and Silas gave him a withering glare. Burying his hands in his jacket pockets, Silas strolled down the hallway, heading back towards the library. When he arrived back downstairs, he found that Levi had gone, likely off to his bed chamber.

Silas wasn't at all tired. He felt wide awake. So, he began to peruse the shelves, looking for a book to keep his mind occupied. He couldn't stop thinking about Miss Wilds and her bewitching eyes.

Chapter 7

Lucy lay in the unfamiliar bed, wide awake. She wasn't even a little sleepy. The bed, while comfortable, was not her own. The duvet was made of slippery satin and felt cool against her skin.

She wasn't often away from home. Even the sounds were different—crickets chirped in the distance, but other than that it was so quiet. She was used to the sounds of London—people talking, horses' hooves clopping in the street. She had never known that silence had a presence of its own.

Not to mention—she could not stop thinking of the Honourable Mr Silas Sweet.

Thinking of him will only bring heartache, she reminded herself.

When Lucy was eighteen, she had given her heart to another. She had learned then that men cannot be trusted. His name was Edward Russ, and he was the son of a merchant. He was on her social level, yet he believed in political discourse and in educating women.

Lucy had thought that she had found the one person in the entire world who could possibly understand her. But it had all ended in disaster. His affection for Lucy had waned, and he had ended things so that he could pursue another woman.

Lucy had been devastated. She would never find a man who was like him, and she knew it. Although, if there had been, she certainly wouldn't have allowed things to get very far.

Her spinster aunt was the one person in Lucy's life who was always happy. Someday, when Lucy herself had come to terms with the thought that she would never have a man fall madly in love with her, she, too, would be happy.

Remaining unmarried will be fine for me. I have my wonderful aunt, my little home, my paintings, and my books.

She got up, putting on her peignoir. It was made of a soft silk, and had been a gift from her aunt. They couldn't often afford nice things. This was one of the few nice things that she owned.

She decided that she would go down to the Sweets' library, to borrow a book. During their garden walk, Dinah had assured her that it would be fine for Lucy to help herself.

She lit a candle and then crept from her room. As she walked down the hallway, her footsteps were muffled by the soft, thick runner carpet.

When she entered the library, she was surprised to find that someone was already there, the golden light of the candle pooling all around him.

Mr Silas Sweet looked up from the book that was balanced on the arm of his chair.

His frock coat was flung over the chair beside him, and a forelock of dark hair had tumbled over his forehead. He was wearing his breeches and his white shirt, his cravat and top buttons undone to reveal the skin of his chest and a light dusting of dark hair.

"Oh, sorry—" she stammered, turning to go. In that lighting, with his shirt undone like that, he was even more alluring than he had been earlier. She hadn't known it to be possible.

"No, stay," he said.

She froze—he was like a magician, and he had uttered the magic words. It was scandalous for them to be there, alone. If anyone found out, Lucy's reputation would be ruined beyond repair. At the same time, she wanted to stay. She knew very well that no one else was up. Not when it was nearly three of the clock.

"What brings you here at this hour?" he asked, getting up and walking towards her. His feet were bare, padding softly across the floor.

"I couldn't sleep, and I wanted to find a book," she said. "Dinah told me that it would be all right."

"Of course, it is," he assured her. "You like Defoe?"

"I do." She set her candle down on the table, following him over to the shelves.

“I’m sure we can find you something which suits your sensibilities,” he mused thoughtfully.

He moved over to the massive shelves, holding his candle up to peer at the titles on the spines. Most of them were in gold, flickering like fairy magic.

“Here,” he said, pulling one out. It was a slim volume, bound in a dark red leather. “Have you read much Walter Scott? It’s poetry, but I’m sure even a reader of novels can appreciate *The Lady of the Lake*.”

She accepted it. “I’ve not read much Scott,” she admitted. Her interest was piqued.

I feel like he already knows me. If she liked the book, it would prove something. Although what it could be, she wasn’t sure.

“You might like it—three men vying for the affections of one particular lady.” His eyes cut low, and Lucy felt suddenly a bit racy—standing there in her nightgown and thin peignoir. Her skin rose in goosebumps, though she felt pleasure at the way that he was looking at her.

“What makes you think I’d be interested in that?” She raised an eyebrow, glad of the dim lighting which hid most of her blush.

She looked up, into his blue eyes. They were standing very close. She

could smell his spicy scent—she didn't know what it was. It was like cloves and oranges and something masculine, something that was utterly himself.

"Where do you live?" he asked, his gaze very much on her lips.

"London. Harley Street." She licked her lips, watching his pupils dilate at the sight.

"Why have I never seen you before? After all, your aunt and my mother were close friends."

"I don't mix much with the ton."

"You don't have to be among the ton to go out in London," he pointed out. His eyes locked with hers. She felt a frisson rise between them.

"Parading around like a show pony is not my style," she replied. In the candlelight, his face was golden, with dark shadows cast from the planes of his face.

"I daresay, it's not." He smiled, baring his perfect white teeth. She looked away from him, at the row of books beside her. "There's no need for you to parade about. You're quite noticeable even when you're doing nothing."

She gasped, her eyes meeting his. Before she could think, he leaned in, his lips brushing against hers. She kissed him back, losing herself in

the sheer pleasure of it—the pleasant warming sensation pooling in her belly, the way her skin warmed at the touch of his fingers on the small of her back. His small growth of stubble rasped against her skin.

He pulled her towards him. She set the book on the table beside them, then placed both of her hands on his chest, feeling his hard, flat muscles through his soft shirt. She grabbed handfuls of the fabric as his other hand cupped her cheek.

Her eyes shot open as she realized the utter impropriety of the situation. Her reputation could be ruined! She pushed him away. His eyes were soft, making her ache to pull him back. But she didn't know him. He could ruin everything for her.

Lucy cleared her throat. "Goodnight," she said curtly, turning and fleeing the library. Her face was hot. He said nothing, only smiled devilishly, his blue eyes lighting up like a flame. Only when she was far enough away to think did she realized that she'd forgotten the book back on the library table.

Now what am I supposed to do?

Chapter 8

It was Friday morning, and all fifteen of the guests had arrived. The gentlemen were going out hunting. It was a brilliantly sunny day, warm with a cool breeze. They rode their horses at a leisurely walk while the dogs ran ahead of them, sniffing around with lazy abandon.

Lord Reginald Stay, Marquess of Browning, was riding beside Silas. Lord Browning had been acquainted with the family distantly until only very recently. He had been engaged to another lady—who had, unfortunately, passed after falling ill.

“Your sister, Miss Sweet, is a very intelligent and genteel sort of lady,” he said. There was the hint of sadness about him, but he also seemed very hopeful.

Silas grinned. He had seen Dinah eying Lord Browning. She liked handsome gentlemen and Lord Browning was certainly that, with his brunet hair which tumbled over his forehead and his razor-sharp jawline. He would make her an excellent husband, not to mention, a marchioness.

“She is very eager to find a suitable match,” he said. “I’m sure that the two of you will have time to talk some more later today.” He was fully happy to give Lord Browning his whole-hearted approbation of the match.

“Silas!” Levi called out from up ahead. “Look at these hoof prints! I think it’s him!” His bay hunter danced nervously.

“We’ve been hunting one buck all summer,” Silas told Lord Browning, who nodded, his gaze towards Levi, who was staring down at the ground, trying to discern which way the buck had gone.

“The younger Miss Wilds is a beauty,” Percy said, riding up beside them like a dark cloud on a sunny horizon. Silas eyed him with suspicion. “It’s a shame she’s so… unusual.” Percy wrinkled his nose.

“Whatever could you mean by that?” Silas demanded.

“The woman is likely to end up a spinster, just like her aunt. Once, I heard her express her opinion on politics at my own cousin’s dinner, even though no one had asked her what she thought!” He shook his head. “It was charitable of Lord Thornbridge to invite the two ape-leaders for the weekend, even though they are clearly unwanted.”

Silas saw red. As an unmarried gentleman, he hated the scorn that such a choice caused for both sexes who chose not to wed. It was certainly more so for unmarried females. However, he also cared about what his present company thought, so he held his tongue.

“I find myself inclined to agree with you, Percy,” he said, instead. “A woman having such strong opinions takes away any physical attractiveness that she may have. I would never lay so much as a finger on a woman such as the younger Miss Wilds.” It was all a lie. But Silas knew that if Percy was aware of his preference for Miss Wilds, then he would try to pursue her himself, if only to spite Silas for ruining his chances with Miss Weaver.

“I plan to bag this buck by the end of the weekend,” Percy boasted. “You will all see.”

“I’ll make you a bet, Percy,” Silas offered, suddenly getting a delicious idea.

“Go on,” Percy urged, smiling at him. There was a dangerous glint in his eye. Silas knew that Percy Stalton could not turn down a bet to save his own life.

“If I get the buck, then you must wear a dunce cap to supper that evening.” It had happened before, and Silas had quite enjoyed the evening. They had been at their gentlemen’s club in London. Percy had thoroughly lost to Silas.

“Very well, Mr Sweet,” Percy said, flashing him a dangerous smile. “If I get the buck, then you must ask Miss Lucy Wilds to marry you.”

Levi, overhearing what Percy had said, turned back towards them. “Silas, you cannot agree to it.”

Michael, too, turned his horse around. He looked positively horrified. “You cannot play with Miss Wilds’ affections in this way.”

Silas was eager to beat Percy, however. He was annoyed by his constant, nagging presence and wanted nothing more than to beat him and watch that smug grin drop from his face. “Let’s shake on it, Percy.” He thrust out his hand, in the space between their horses. Percy clasped hands with him.

Silas glanced back, to see if his father had heard. However, Lord Thornbridge was far back, with three other older gentlemen. His face was turned towards home.

“Let’s go,” Percy said, urging his horse into a gallop, just as the hounds took off baying.

Silas hurried after him, touching his heels to Black Jack’s sides. His horse sprang into a gallop. Percy was already vanishing ahead of him, into the clearing up ahead. Silas heard the sound of a rifle, discharging just ahead of him. He arrived in the clearing just in time to see that Percy had gotten the prized buck.

Silas’s heart sank. He had lost the bet. His heartbeat thundered in his ears.

Percy sat up proudly on his mount. The barrel of his rifle was smoking. “Congratulations on your engagement, Silas.”

Chapter 9

The drawing room of Thornbridge Manor was decorated in a white silk paper with a pattern of small, blue flowers. The white, filmy curtains swayed in the breeze from the open window. The ladies had spent the morning quietly ensconced inside, out of the heat of the day.

Lucy was seated on a blue velvet settee, a cup of tea and a saucer balanced precariously in her hand. Her upper lip was covered in a thin sweat. Aunt Joan sat beside her, while Lady Baldwin sat across from them. The other ladies were all scattered around the room.

“It was ever so kind of his lordship to ask us,” Aunt Joan was saying. “Lucy and I so rarely get invited to anything.”

“We mostly prefer it that way, Aunt Joan,” Lucy reminded her.

“Do you really?” Lady Baldwin asked. She was a kind lady, with blonde hair pulled into an elegant chignon. She was dressed in a lemon-coloured silk, which made her look like a large yellow flower.

“We live very quietly,” Aunt Joan said. “Ever since my dear brother and his wife passed nearly ten years ago, when Lucy was fourteen.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Fortunately, we have each other.” Aunt Joan and Lucy shared a look. They had been through so much together.

“We do,” Lucy agreed with a smile. She knew she was lucky to have Aunt Joan. It meant she wasn’t alone in the world.

Dinah walked over, sitting down beside Lucy. They both smiled at each other.

“How are things going?” she asked.

“Excellent.” An image of Silas Sweet, candlelight flickering across his skin, flashed into her memory. She attempted to banish him, but a tell-tale feeling of desire rose within her.

“I saw you speaking with Lord Browning last night,” Aunt Joan said.

A soft blush coloured Dinah’s cheeks.

“Lord Browning seems very amenable,” she said. “I’m very glad that he’s come to join us this weekend.”

“Good to hear. He’s a very dashing gentleman. He would make an excellent husband.” Aunt Joan took a sip of her tea. There was nothing Aunt Joan loved more than to talk about marriage. Though she herself had never been married, she was more than happy to discuss the impending nuptials of others.

Lady Baldwin beamed, adding, “Not to mention, the house at Browning is an absolute gem. You will absolutely love Browning Hall.”

“What’s the library like?” Dinah asked. Lucy grinned. It would have been the first thing that she would have asked, as well.

“It’s very large,” Lady Baldwin replied.

Lucy and Dinah shared a grin.

“It was so good of your father to throw you this party,” Aunt Joan said.

“It was,” Dinah agreed. “He always wants to do what’s best for me, and I will be turning two-and-twenty in September, so I need to find a husband and settle down.”

They all spoke for a little while longer about Lord Browning and his merits, then Aunt Joan and Lady Baldwin both got up to help themselves to more tea and cake, leaving Dinah and Lucy alone.

“Do you wish to marry?” Lucy asked, curious to know Dinah’s true feelings. After all, Lucy had no plans to wed. She thought the whole thing a definite scourge against women.

“Of course, she does,” Miss Weaver hissed, overhearing the discussion. “Don’t you?”

“Not at all.” Lucy watched as Miss Weaver tilted her head to the side. “You’re very opinionated, Miss Wilds.” She squinted her eyes, as if she couldn’t identify what Lucy was.

“I know. It’s one of my faults.” She shrugged helplessly, even though she was anything but.

“I like it,” Dinah said, coming to Lucy’s rescue. “It’s nice to know exactly what you’re thinking. Everyone else lies for appearance’s sake.”

Lucy laughed. “It’s been a long time since I last cared about that.”

They both watched as Miss Weaver moved off to join another conversation, clearly having found that both of them were hopeless.

“My brother Silas can appreciate a woman who isn’t afraid to speak her mind.” Dinah’s eyes cut over to Lucy pointedly.

“He was kind enough to indulge me last night,” Lucy replied vaguely. Her mind was on the library, Mr Sweet’s face in the flickering candlelight. She could feel a blush creeping up on her.

“Did he?” Dinah asked, curiously.

“What of your brother, Mr Michael Sweet?” Lucy asked, veering the conversation away from Mr Silas Sweet.

“He is very…” Dinah trailed off, frowning thoughtfully. “Traditional.”

Lucy smiled, swallowing. She knew that Silas Sweet had a preference for her. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have kissed her so passionately. What she didn’t know was whether it was entirely carnal, or if he truly appreciated her mind.

That was an important distinction. Lucy took a sip of her tea, to find that it had grown cold.

The gentlemen had returned home with Percy gloating about having bagged the buck that Levi and Silas had been after all summer. Silas was still in shock at how quickly Percy had done it, after he and Levi had spent the past several weeks attempting to catch him.

“Silas,” Michael called out. He turned to find that Levi and Michael were hanging back, out on the drive. He walked over to them. Both were frowning.

“You can’t be seriously considering asking Miss Wilds to marry you,” Michael said. “You only just said that you would never consider her.”

“It’s a gentlemen’s bet,” he said. “I shook on it, and now, I must go on with it.” *Though, I am merely using this as an excuse to pursue her*, he thought, overall pleased with himself for engineering it. He was like a puppeteer, and Percy dangled on the ends of his strings.

From behind him, Percy spoke. “It’s only an engagement, so Silas may break it at any time that he wishes.” He smiled slyly. Silas’ stomach did a nauseated flip at the thought of treating Miss Wilds in such a cavalier manner. He was finding, more and more, that Percy Stalton was a snake.

“You wouldn’t dare treat a woman such as Miss Wilds in such a dishonourable manner!” Levi growled.

“No, I would not.” *It wouldn’t be such a bad thing to be engaged to Miss Wilds*, he mused to himself.

He thought about that kiss—the way she’d put her hands on his chest. Her soft moans, and how utterly exquisite they were. She would be an interesting lover—passionate. Many of the ladies were only pretending to enjoy it, to please him.

But Miss Wilds wasn’t pretending. No, she had been completely sincere in her response. He recalled the way she had gripped his shirt in her hands.

“She’ll probably turn me down anyway,” he said, shrugging.

“Then you’ll have to convince her,” Percy insisted. “Or else you won’t have done your part in the bet.”

Silas glared at him. He wasn’t about to let Percy think that he’d won. “Don’t worry. I’m sure it’ll be easy. After all, I don’t see anyone else lining up to take her from me.”

The words were cruel and he knew it. He hated that they had come from his lips. But he didn’t want them to think that he was changing his mind. He hated losing anything. That buck was going to rankle for a very, very long time. Percy would make sure to remind him of it every chance he got.

Levi and Michael both looked upset, while Percy smiled at him. Silas didn’t want to discuss it any longer. He was neither going to change his mind, nor was he going to back down.

Silas turned away from them, leaving the hot summer sun for the cool, dark interior of the manor. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least now he had a good reason to wholeheartedly pursue Miss Wilds, without Percy butting in to ruin it.

Chapter 10

That evening, there was a ball hosted by Viscount Thornbridge. The ballroom was awash in light from tall white three-hour candles, and the space was decorated with pale white streamers and large vases, filled with fresh flowers from the garden. Lucy and Aunt Joan walked in together.

The room seemed almost enchanted, in the way that the light flickered over the jewels and silks that the guests wore. Lucy found her gaze caught by many things. She looked around, taking in as much as she possibly could.

The soft fabric of Lucy's dress swished around her legs. She was dressed in her finest muslin, which had pale blue and cream stripes and was edged in French lace. The golden filigree locket which had belonged to her mother hung on a black ribbon tied around her neck, and her hair was pulled back into a bun, with ringlets framing her face.

The only problem was the way her brand-new dancing slippers pinched at her toes.

"Oh!" Aunt Joan gasped. "How Amelia would have loved to see this." Aunt Joan was wearing a simple grey muslin with a drop-pearl pendant on a blue ribbon at her neck. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

Lucy beamed. She knew Aunt Joan was having the time of her life.

She wouldn't have denied her this for the world, yet she still regretted coming. She chafed at the thought of spending the whole night being paraded about like a prize pony. It had been a long time since she'd last been at a ball, and she hadn't missed it one bit.

The last time, it had been with Edward. She had clasped his arm, her eyes taking in his fine profile. She had been in love, while *he*—Lucy cringed, then banished him from her mind. Not only did she not want to think of him, she also didn't want to worry about being asked to dance. If she stuck by Aunt Joan, then maybe she wouldn't have to spend the evening making polite conversation with a gentleman whom she barely knew.

"I'm so glad that we've come," Aunt Joan said, touching her gently on the arm.

"Me too."

"I'm going to go and speak with Lady Baldwin," Aunt Joan told her. "I must compliment her on her gown!"

Lucy watched as her aunt went over to a lady that they had made the acquaintance of earlier that day. She was wearing a fine black and white striped silk gown that was, in fact, very nice.

Lucy glanced around, seeing that everyone was dressed in their finery. If she could, she would melt into the beautiful tapestry that was just behind her. She glanced at it, finding that it was a late medieval thing with a forest woven into it.

Lucy turned back to the crowd. Dinah was off to the side, looking like an angel in her white silk gown. She was talking animatedly with Lord Browning. The two of them were smiling at each other in a manner that was positively telling. Lucy was happy for her new friend. Lord Browning was certainly handsome, though Lucy had yet to speak with him.

"Miss Wilds!" Lord Thornbridge called out to her. She turned, finding that the viscount was walking over to her, making his way through groups of people. He was dressed in a dark red frock coat and cream-coloured breeches. The candlelight gleamed on his boots. He bowed to her gallantly, and she curtsied to him.

He looked like an older version of his son—Mr Silas Sweet. His black hair was shot through with silver, and his face was deeply lined. Lucy imagined that Silas would be his twin in a few decades.

"How is your evening going, Miss Wilds?" he asked kindly.

"It's going very well, My Lord," she said. "Thank you so much for inviting us. It was very kind of you to include my aunt and myself." She was quickly running out of pleasantries and hoped that he would have to move on soon, to talk to his other guests.

"I was happy to do so. Your aunt was a particular friend of my late wife," he said. "She valued Joan's friendship greatly. To own the truth, she has been writing to me ever since my wife's untimely passing, and she has proved to be a great comfort in my grief."

Both of them looked to where Aunt Joan and Lady Baldwin were talking.

“In her last letter to me, she said that you were a reader,” Lord Thornbridge said. His eyes seemed watery, and he sniffed.

Lucy presumed that he wouldn’t approve, yet she was determined to prove to him that it was not something to be ashamed of. “I am,” she confirmed, steeling herself for the disagreement that was to come.

“I admire a woman who has intellectual inclinations,” he said, to her surprise. “My son, Silas, is unmarried. He is looking for a woman who has both intelligence and wit.” He winked. “I think you could convince him that you would be able to keep him on his toes.” He beamed at her, though it was artless. He meant it kindly, as a father who wants the best for his son.

Lucy’s face burned bright red. She had been having conflicted thoughts about him all day. She recalled the soft touch of his lips, the way his scruffy beard had rubbed against her chin.

“Oh, um…” she muttered, wondering how best to make her escape. The viscount was grinning at her. She knew she was trying to be kind, but… She wasn’t able to complete the thought.

“Are you talking of me, Father?” Silas asked from behind Lucy, who froze, horrified. She didn’t dare look at him, for she knew that her thoughts would be apparent if she did. He saw her far too clearly for her comfort, and it caused her to go into a state of complete panic.

“Miss Wilds is looking for a dance partner,” Lord Thornbridge said, winking again at Lucy, who blushed even more deeply as she finally turned to face Mr Sweet. He was smiling from ear to ear.

I wonder if they planned this, she thought.

"Ah! I would be delighted. If you would do me the honour, Miss Wilds?" He offered his arm to her, every inch the perfect gentleman. Though, she knew the real Silas Sweet—she had met him in the library.

"Of course," she murmured. *I suppose this is what dancing's all about—being uncomfortable around perfect strangers.* Except, he wasn't a stranger. They had kissed, late in the night. That brought him somehow closer, made him less of an unknown.

He led her out to the centre of the room, just as the band began to play. The first dance was a fast-paced country dance with lots of motion. Since Lucy wasn't familiar with it, she had to focus on the steps, imitating what everyone else was doing.

There wasn't much occasion for talking, not that Lucy wanted to talk with Mr Sweet. On occasion, though, her gaze would lock with his. She would be the first to look away, as though burned. She could tell by the sparkle of mischief in his eye that he wanted to discuss the kiss… perhaps picking up where they'd left off.

It slowly wound down. She curtsied to him, then turned away, just as the second set began. She felt relieved, looking for her escape in the form of either Dinah or Aunt Joan. She saw neither.

"Please," he said, reaching for her. "Don't go yet." The music for the next dance began, and Lucy found herself pulled into his arms. Their

eyes met as he pulled her closer, his hand on her waist. It was a waltz, with slowly swelling music that Lucy could feel in her bones. His hand pressed into her lower back, pulling her body closer to his. She felt her face burn crimson. She could not deny that she was enjoying this. It was unfortunate that they were in the middle of a crowded room, so anyone could see.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, his breath warm against her skin. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

Their eyes met as he pulled away. His lips quirked upward in a grin. Lucy felt electricity flow through her. She felt like he was the sun and she was a flower, turning her face to follow wherever he decided to move.

“Really?” she asked, cursing herself for sounding eager. She needed to put space between them, for she felt like she was losing her balance.

“Yes. Please tell me that you haven’t forgotten about the library?” His eyes remained on hers, holding her there.

“No.” She swallowed, looking away from him. “I—”

“Surely, you feel it, too.” When she dared meet his gaze, his eyes were softened, though he was no longer smiling. She swallowed. The longer she didn’t answer, the bigger his smile became. “You do. You can’t deny it.”

“To what end?” she asked, shaking her head. “You are the heir of a viscount, and I am nobody.”

“Not nobody,” he insisted. She could feel her cheeks flaming with embarrassment. “You are Miss Lucy Wilds. There is no one else like you in all the world.”

Why is he paying me so much attention, in front of everyone?

The waltz ended. She curtsied to him, her eyes on the tiles of the floor between them. She stared at his boots, trying to think of something to say. Quickly, before he could entice her into yet another dance.

“I need some air.” Then, Lucy made her escape out to the terrace. She breathed in great gulps of air. Silas Sweet was intoxicating—if she didn’t watch out, she’d lose her head. Who knew where it would end up? She needed to be smart. She couldn’t go falling for him—he would make her fall in love with him, and then, when she was inextricably in love, he would vanish.

As men are wont to do, she thought bitterly.

Silas walked slowly, letting Miss Wilds have a moment out on the terrace. He was getting mixed signals from her—she seemed to want more, yet kept running away whenever he tried to make a move. He wasn’t sure how to read them, but decided to follow her, to find out.

He caught Percy’s eye as he passed him. Percy grinned, his eyes

lighting up as he raised his glass to Silas. He was talking to Lady Violet Potsmore, who seemed capable of keeping herself protected from Percy's advances. She was an earl's daughter, which meant that she would never seriously consider Percy.

Not to mention, Lady Violet was fanning herself, stepping backward as Percy slowly inched closer to her. Percy's grin was bright, but Lady Violet was frowning, completely unimpressed.

Silas spotted Lord Browning and Dinah, her hand resting delicately in the bend of Lord Browning's elbow. They had just stepped off of the dance floor and were heading over to the punch bowl. Dinah was beaming, roses in her cheeks. Silas was happy for his sister. They were a good match—very well-suited in terms of temperament.

He then stepped out onto the terrace. It was less crowded out there, yet there were several guests. Two elder gentlemen were smoking their pipes, joined by a third gentleman. Four ladies stood in a circle, their fans doing extra work.

Miss Wilds was up near the balustrade, leaning against it. Torches burned brightly at intervals throughout the garden. He strolled slowly towards her, his hands in his jacket pockets.

"Miss Wilds," he called out softly.

She whirled around to face him. He smiled. She couldn't say this was inappropriate. There was quite a crowd out there, not including the few couples who were strolling about the gardens.

“What do you want, Mr Sweet?” she asked. Her tone was guarded, and a little fatigued. He felt concerned for her.

“To make sure that you are well,” he replied. “You ran away so quickly, and I wanted to be sure that you didn’t need assistance.” He paused. “Are you well, Miss?”

“I’m fine.” She turned back towards the gardens with a great sigh. “I’m not much for balls. I think I’ve gotten tired.”

He moved to stand beside her, allowing there to be a considerate gap between them. He leaned against the balustrade, his hands on the cool stone as he let the silence stretch between them. She seemed to relax. She wasn’t one for idle chatter. That was nice about her.

“The gardens are always so lovely at this time of year,” he commented. “Granted, they were even more lovely when my mother was still alive.”

She was silent. He wondered what she was thinking at that moment, but he didn’t feel that he knew her well enough to ask. He didn’t want to be impertinent. He wanted to know her better. He wanted to prove to her that he was interested, and that his intentions towards her were honourable.

“I was wondering if I might call on you, when you return to London,” he said, daring to take the leap. It was a ball, and they were looking out over the gardens. It was a romantic moment, the perfect time to tell her that he was interested in pursuing her.

“No.”

Silas looked at Miss Wilds in shock. No woman had ever turned down his advances before. Not unless she was already taken. “I don’t understand. I thought that we were getting on very well.”

“You’ve been very kind,” she said, finally looking at him. She looked sad. “But I don’t entertain gentleman callers. I have no interest in marrying, not ever.” She said it so sternly, brooking no argument.

He blinked in surprise. Silas had no idea what to say to that. Keeping her eyes on the ground between them, she moved away from him, curtsying and then rushing away, heading back towards the ballroom. He watched as she melted into the crowd. Apparently, they were even more well-suited than he’d thought. Their views on marriage were exactly the same.

I never imagined that she existed. And yet… she does.

Silas Sweet had met his match. He was going to have to fight against all of her reasonable sensibilities. He laughed, softly to himself. He desired her, more than he had before.

There was no true escape for Lucy. It would be considered rude to vanish from the ball, so she went to the punch bowl, where a footman handed her a glass. She stood there for a moment, then realized that if she kept moving, then no one would ensnare her in discussion.

She then began to walk around the edge of the room, looking for her aunt. She took a sip of the sweet drink, despising the bite of the alcohol.

Lucy was angry with herself for agreeing to come. *What did I think was going to happen? If Aunt Joan and I had just stayed home, I would never have been in this situation.*

Part of her had wanted desperately to tell him yes. But she knew that it could never be. She didn't want to become the Viscountess of Thornbridge—how would she ever begin to perform the necessary functions? There would be endless balls and parties, which Lucy detested.

She would be scorned for her opinions, hated because she wasn't a member of the ton from birth. She was simply Miss Lucy Wilds, orphaned daughter of a tradesman. She could never begin to attempt at being a fancy lady.

She finally spotted Aunt Joan deep in conversation with a group of ladies. All were ensconced in what appeared to be a lively discussion, all of them laughing. Lucy swallowed, relaxing. Her aunt would do all the talking, if Lucy could only stand beside her for the rest of the evening…

"Lucy!" Dinah called out to her. She turned, to find her waving her over. "I was wondering where you were."

"How is your evening going?" Lucy asked, relieved to have found a friendly face.

“Very well.” Dinah slipped her arm around Lucy’s, and the two of them began to walk around the edge of the room. “I saw that you danced with my brother.”

“I did.” As they passed a table, Lucy set down her still-full glass of punch. The fact was, it was too sweet, cloying. She didn’t need any more intoxicants. Mr Silas Sweet was too much on his own.

“He’s a bit of a rascal at times,” Dinah said. “But I can vouch for his character.”

“Can you?”

“Absolutely.”

Lucy didn’t know what to think. She certainly liked him. But she still didn’t want to marry. It was out of the question. She wouldn’t lead him on. Not like that. It had happened to her.

It wasn’t long before Dinah was collected for the next dance by one of the gentlemen, and Lucy found herself standing alone.

She opened her lace fan, which had been dangling from her wrist. She fanned her face, looking around and hoping that no one would notice her.

“Miss Wilds.” It was Mr Stalton, one of Mr Sweet’s friends. He was the son of a rich businessman, she thought she recalled having been told. He grinned at her. He wasn’t very attractive, but he was the sort of man who believed that he was. “Would you do me the honour of this next dance?” He offered her his arm.

She didn’t want to—she didn’t like the way that Mr Stalton smirked at her. But she knew also that it would be a social faux-pas to refuse.

“Of course,” she said, placing her hand on his elbow, and allowing him to ferry her out to the dance floor.

Though the dance was a lively country one, Mr Stalton was able to keep up a conversation throughout. It made Lucy’s head spin.

“I must say, Miss Wilds,” he said, eyeing her appraisingly. “You look stunning this evening.”

“Thank you, sir.” She wished that he would talk of anything else. She had already had Mr Sweet make advances upon her that evening. She didn’t want to continually have to be running away from gentlemen.

“I was wondering if you might want to take a turn about the gardens with me?”

Oh, dear. Not another one. She didn’t know what she had done to catch the eye of not one, but two gentlemen. Mr Stalton’s invitation was both unwelcome and completely scandalous. There was no way that she could accept.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “I do have a reputation to uphold, even if it isn’t one that matters much.”

Mr Stalton’s face looked as though he’d smelled something foul. He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He was angry that she’d turned him down. She swallowed nervously, then curtsied, and then looked around desperately for her aunt.

Chapter 11

Watching Percy dancing with Miss Wilds, Silas felt a flash of jealousy, which he bit back. He wondered what Percy was telling her. He kept up a steady stream of conversation, which she answered politely and briefly.

When it was over, he saw Percy gesture towards the garden terrace in what was clearly an invitation, which she politely declined. She curtsied and then made her escape.

She had turned Silas down. It was unthinkable. He wondered what to do. Pushing her was out of the question. He knew how he would react to something like that. He would need to approach her slowly, to prove to her that he could be trusted. Except…

Except I don't think anyone in their right minds could vouch for my steadfastness in terms of female affections.

Levi found him standing by the punch bowl, drinking.

"How did it go?" his friend asked. Levi was looking debonair in a forest green frock coat with golden buttons. His chestnut hair was swept back from his youthful face.

"When I asked her if I could call on her when she returns to London, she turned me down." Silas knew he was pouting. He couldn't help it.

He hadn't thought that she would say no, particularly not after their kiss the night before.

"I see." Levi sighed, patting him on the shoulder. "Sorry about that, old chap. It must be hard for you to have been turned down. It happens to all of us at least once."

"I'm not giving up."

Levi eyed him in surprise. "You're not?"

"Not even close."

"She's given you an answer, old man. You have to accept it and move on," Levi said, in a moment of perfect advice. However, it wasn't advice that Silas planned to take.

"She's wrong," Silas whispered. He had met the woman of his dreams —his perfect counterpart, the other half of his soul! He needed to show her how perfect they were for each other.

"What happens when she finds out that it's all a bet, Silas?" Levi asked, leaning in and whispering. "She's going to be hurt— devastated."

Oh, that. It was like a door slamming shut.

“Then I’ll just have to make sure that she never finds out. I won’t stop until I’ve won.”

Levi sighed, shaking his head sadly. The two friends stood side by side, deep in their own thoughts. Silas knew he sounded callous. He wondered if he should come clean to Levi, tell his friend the truth—that he was genuinely interested in Miss Wilds.

“I see that Dinah and Lord Browning are getting on well,” Levi commented. The two of them watched as Dinah and Lord Browning went out to the terrace, arm in arm. Silas noted the besotted look in both of their eyes.

“I imagine that he’ll ask Father for permission by the end of the weekend.” It seemed to be a given, at this point. After all, Dinah had never been so interested in any prospects. Not until Lord Browning. Her smile was so brilliant, it warmed her brother’s heart.

“Then the weekend has been a success,” Levi said.

“Indeed.” Silas held up his glass. “Cheers to that.” The two friends clinked glasses, then stood in silence. Silas found Miss Wilds in the crowd again, standing beside her aunt. Her look was unreadable.

I will convince her, he promised himself. *By the end of the weekend*.

Chapter 12

It was about late morning, the day after the ball. Everyone had slept in, then gotten together for a late brunch. After the group had breakfasted, Dinah had gotten all of the young people to go blackberry picking.

Lucy was dressed in a lightweight white cotton dress, her straw bonnet, and the black ribbon in a bow beneath her chin. The heels of her little half-boots sunk into the damp earth as she walked.

No one was really talking. They all walked in silence, for the most part. It had been a late night and Lucy felt a little sleepy, even after two cups of strong tea with toast.

As they all walked in a large group, Mr Sweet kept attempting to sidle up next to her. She was able to keep putting another person between them, but in order to do so, she had to be on the alert at all times. Mr Sweet was quite determined to proclaim his affections for her, yet again. She had to keep steeling herself. His presence was intoxicating, and if she didn't watch, she'd end up engaged to him by accident.

Dinah slipped her arm into Lucy's. She leaned in to whisper to Lucy happily. "Reginald just told me that he's going to ask my father for his permission!"

"Oh, Dinah! That's wonderful news!"

Dinah was beaming, clearly thrilled. She squeezed Lucy's arm. "This weekend has been the best of my life," she said. "Not only have I met my future husband, I believe that you and I shall be good friends."

"I couldn't agree more," Lucy confirmed.

"After you leave, I will be happy to write to you," Dinah said, hopefully.

"I would expect nothing less." The idea of continuing her friendship with Dinah pleased Lucy. The two of them had similar tastes and opinions. Their letters would be food for thought.

"Do you have any prospects?" Dinah asked her. "I saw you dancing with several gentlemen last night—all of them unmarried!"

"No." Lucy's stomach did a flip as she recalled the night before. Too much had happened, and all of it she wished she could make go away. If she could do that night over, she would have stayed by her aunt's side and refused all offers of dancing.

Dinah frowned, though the corners of her lips were quirked upward. "Oh, come now, Lucy. Don't you want to be wed?"

"What's the point?" Lucy asked, raising her voice so that Mr Silas Sweet could overhear and, perhaps, be deterred. "Unless you must, for financial reasons. I don't need to. I've got a comfortable home and inheritance."

“For love,” Dinah replied, nudging her gently with an elbow.

Lucy sighed, shaking her head. She had been down that road once before and she knew how it ended. “Men cannot be trusted.”

“Not all men or gentlemen are the same,” Dinah argued.

“I cannot be swayed,” Lucy told her. “Not when my experience has always been so.”

Dinah’s brow was furrowed, but she relented. “Very well. Although, I hope, for your sake, that someday you are proven very wrong, and some man loves you, as you so richly deserve.”

Lucy’s throat tightened. Her friend’s sentiment moved her. It also caused her a very sharp pain, for she knew that it would never happen. No man was capable of loving her as she ought to be. It wasn’t possible. She was too opinionated and headstrong.

They had arrived at the berry patch, which was right up against the woods. Lucy and Dinah began to set to. Lucy had never picked fresh berries before and she began to fill her basket, marvelling at their sweet scent.

Beside her, Dinah laughed. “I like to sneak one every now and then,” she confessed, winking and then popping a berry into her mouth. Lucy laughed, then turned back to her task.

Lucy picked one particularly large berry, then, glancing around to see if anyone was watching, she popped it into her mouth and bit into it. She closed her eyes as the sweetest, warm juice spread across her tongue. Lucy loved berries, but she had never had a berry fresh from the vine before. It tasted of sunshine.

Further back, under the cover of the trees, Lucy found a particularly thick patch of them, and fixed her sights on it. The berries were dark jewels, set against the green leaves. Lucy was determined to recall the colours and the way that the berries clustered for a painting for later.

She began to pick, following the patch deeper into the woods. In the shade of the canopy, it was cool and dark. Her mind was so intent on her task, she didn't realize that she had gotten away from Dinah, or even the rest of the group.

As she plucked berries, she found herself thinking of Silas's lips, and how soft they had been, pressed against her own. She thought of how her whole body had seemed to open at the feel of his hand on her lower back, pulling her close to him. She had felt his warmth through her thin peignoir and nightgown, and the hardness of his muscles underneath her hands.

Suddenly, there was a hiss from near where she had just placed her foot. Jarred from her thoughts, she looked down in time to see the adder, which she had nearly stepped on.

It was large and dark, with a zigzag pattern along its back, coiled up underneath one of the blackberry bushes. It reared its head back, its black eyes glittering.

Lucy screamed, jumping back just as it struck. It barely missed her right leg, as she continued backing away from it. Her heart was pounding in her chest. As she moved back, she bumped into someone behind her. A hand steadied her, gently taking her arm.

“The adder only bites when it’s being attacked,” Silas explained from close behind her. She half-turned towards him, still keeping the snake in sight. His presence calmed her immediately.

Using a stick, he gently moved the snake away. “I do not believe in killing an animal, simply because it’s occupying the same space as humans.”

Lucy, moved by the sentiment, nodded. “I admire your respect for nature, Mr Sweet.” Her eyes went to where he was still holding her. He let go of her arm.

He smiled, his eyes going soft. “Please, Miss Wilds. You must call me Silas. Those who matter to me do.” She could not deny that this distinction brought her pleasure.

“Then you must call me Lucy.” She knew she was blushing furiously, but she was enjoying the conversation and did not want it to end.

“As you wish.” He smiled at her. “Come. There’s a good patch over there. I found it the other day when I came to check if the berries were ripe for picking.”

He led her over to the patch and they began to pick, side by side, in

companionable silence. Lucy, whenever she found a particularly large, ripe berry, placed it into her mouth. As her teeth sank into the berry, sweet juice permeated her taste buds.

“Do you always keep the best berries for yourself, Lucy?” Silas asked.

“Only when they are fresh off of the vine,” she explained. “I’ve spent most of my life in London. There are few opportunities for me to have a ripe, freshly-picked blackberry.”

“Then I shan’t get in your way.” He held one out to her. “Here’s a good one.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. She accepted it, their eyes meeting. She put it into her mouth, biting into it.

“How is it?” he asked.

“Very good. Thank you.”

He nodded, smiling coyly as he returned to the task at hand.

They continued picking; the only sound was soft thud of the picked berries on the bottom of their baskets. Lucy swallowed, recalling the night before. She had been very abrupt with him. A flash of guilt overwhelmed her.

Perhaps, I should apologize and explain. Silas seemed like the sort of person who would understand.

"I'm sorry that I was forceful last night." She kept her eyes on the work that her hands were doing, though she could sense that he was looking at her.

"It's quite all right." His tone was gentle, which made her feel even worse.

Lucy felt that she needed to explain, if only to soften her refusal. "It was several years ago when I decided that I would never marry."

"I, too, have made a similar choice," he responded. She looked over at him in surprise. "I have always preferred being single, but…" He trailed off, as though trying to choose his words carefully. "Meeting you has changed something for me."

Lucy's pulse raced as their eyes met. Her thoughts were disordered. She believed him to be an honest gentleman, and she was overwhelmed by how much she ached for what he said to be true. He smiled, which made her heart pitter-patter.

"You have a bit of berry on your lip," he said, reaching up and using his thumb to wipe it away. Her skin tingled at his touch. That warm, pleasant rush that only he had ever caused her pooled in the bottom of her stomach.

His eyes were on fire, burning with desire. Lucy wanted him to touch

her again. They were alone. The sounds of the others were far away, and on the other side of the trees. She suddenly realized how hidden they were—how alone.

He seemed to know it, as well. Silas moved closer to her, leaning in. This time, the kiss was heated and desperate. Lucy's back was against a tree, the bark rough. She dropped her basket. Her hands were on his chest, grabbing fistfuls of his jacket.

Her mouth opened as she moaned with pleasure. He dipped his tongue into her mouth, the tip of it running over her teeth. His hands plundered her breasts, his thumbs caressing her nipples. Lucy moaned again, all of the sensations driving her into a state of abandon. She had never wanted something so badly that she ached—not in the way that Silas made her. He seemed to know exactly what to do.

He trailed kisses along her neck, his breath warm on the tender skin beneath her ear. Her bonnet slipped back, off of her head. Lucy panted, her fingers weaving into his hair.

How could something so positively brazen feel so good? Shouldn't she want to stop? But she didn't. She wanted more. As much as he was willing to give.

"Lucy?" Dinah called, from the other side of the trees.

They both moved apart, as though shocked. Their eyes were locked. Lucy straightened her skirts. She felt like she was waking up from a dream. He smiled at her, but she didn't return it.

What have I almost done? she wondered in horrified surprise. She could feel her blood coursing through her veins, almost singing with joy. Her heart sank, though.

"Yes, Dinah?" Lucy yelled back. Her bonnet had fallen off of her head, and she settled it back over her hair.

With one lingering glance back at Silas, she picked up her basket and walked away. Her heart was absolutely pounding, and her thoughts were a flurry of different remembrances and sensations.

"There you are," Dinah said, smiling. Lucy tried to discern if Dinah had seen anything, but she couldn't tell. "Are you ready to head back?"

"Yes." The two friends linked arms. Lucy's heart was still pounding in her chest as she talked to Dinah.

What just happened? she wondered. Two people who do not want to marry, kissing in the woods! It was like *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. She thought about how Silas himself looked like a dark fairy king, with his burning blue eyes. She knew nothing good could come of it, but she wanted more from him.

Chapter 13

Silas followed behind at a slower pace than all of the others. He wanted a moment to think. His heart was still racing, after his amorous encounter with Lucy in the woods.

He recalled the way that she had gasped softly. She had liked what he had done, had clearly wanted him to continue. If only Dinah had come much later, then he might have been able to get somewhere.

He could see Lucy and his sister, their arms linked as they talked. Together, they looked like a Rococo painting, with Lucy in white and Dinah in a pale pink, their baskets dangling from their arms.

He was ashamed of accepting Percy's bet, but he didn't want to appear weak and back out of it. He would never hear the end of it. For Percy was, unfortunately, a part of their lives. The Sweet family would never be rid of him—not while the Stalton estate bordered their own.

The fact is, though, I'm actually interested in her. What I told her in the woods was true. She has changed things for me. Marriage wouldn't be so bad, if she were my wife. She's smart and strong. She would challenge me, just as I would challenge her.

He smiled to himself, imagining the possibility.

"What are you smiling about?" Levi asked.

Silas beamed at his friend, who had snuck up on him. “Reminiscing on other times,” he replied vaguely.

“Very well, then,” Levi replied. “Keep your secrets.”

“Oh, I will, my friend.”

The group arrived back at the house, where their baskets were collected by the scullery maids and brought to the cook, Mrs. Larson, who would make the berries into blackberry compote for dessert.

Silas trailed after the group, which was heading up to the parlour for glasses of fresh, cold lemonade before luncheon was served.

“Silas!” his father said, drawing him off to the side. The older members of the party had remained at the house, spending the morning playing cards and chatting in the cool indoors.

“Father.” He smiled. “How was your morning?”

“Very good. Us older folk have been sitting and playing cards.”

“Sounds like a nice, quiet morning.” Silas knew that it was the sort of morning that his father preferred.

“It was. A quiet morning, with a rousing discussion about the effects and uses of gruel in digestion.” His father was looking out over the group, a happy grin on his face. Including the Sweet family, their number was nearly twenty. The room was filled with conversation, which was like the low buzz of bees.

Silas’ gaze gravitated towards Lucy, who sat beside her aunt, deep in conversation. He could tell that the both of them were close, and that they both deeply cared for one another. They would have to be—from the sound of it, Miss Joan Wilds had raised Lucy after her parents’ passing.

He was thinking about how it would be Miss Joan Wilds from whom he’d have to ask permission. *Or, would it be Lucy herself*? he wondered. After all, she seemed so independent and fierce. His thoughts were interrupted by his father.

“What do you think of Miss Lucy Wilds?” His father beamed at him, clearly pleased that he had found the perfect match for Silas. He was right, of course.

Silas felt as though he’d been struck by lightning, but he recovered quickly. Silas was too proud to give his father what he wanted. He had fought against his family too hard and too long to give up that easily.

“I must get to know her better,” he replied soberly.

“I have something that I want to give you,” the viscount replied, thoughtfully. “But I feel that you’re not quite ready for it.” He was just reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket to take something out.

His curiosity piqued, Silas waited for his father to explain further. Josiah opened his mouth, but then was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Fort, the butler.

"A messenger has arrived, My Lord," he said. "From London." In his hand was a silver tray with a letter on top. Silas noticed the hand, which looked to be the writing of his father's solicitor in London, who had a particularly distinctive flourish to his letters.

It must be serious. The solicitor had sent the update on their finances with Michael. He would have nothing to say, unless it was an emergency that had happened in the time since Michael had left the city.

"Excuse me," his father said, taking the letter. He moved off to the side, where he broke the seal, then unfolded it. Silas watched, burning with curiosity as his father read the contents, a frown coming over his face.

He refolded it, putting it into his pocket.

"What does it say?" Silas asked.

"I must go to London, immediately," his father said. "I have received word that a fire on the block has damaged our town home."

"You cannot leave in the middle of the party." After all, he was the

host. In his absence, Silas was going to have to step in. It would cut into his time to pursue Lucy.

"I am anxious to assess the severity of the damage for myself as soon as possible." He looked at Silas. It was clear that he was concerned. "I trust that I can leave it to you to play the host in my absence?"

"Of course," Silas agreed.

"Thank you. I knew that I could count on you to step in." His father patted him on the shoulder. He cleared his throat and stepped forward to address the entire gathering. He grabbed an empty glass from beside the lemonade and clinked a spoon against it to get everyone's attention. "Everyone! It has come to my attention that there has been a fire on the block where my London town home is located. Unfortunately, I must leave you all. In my stead, Silas will act as your host for the remainder of the weekend."

There was an outpouring of grief, on his father's behalf. He began to say his goodbyes to all those gathered. Silas stood by the door. He knew that accidents happened, and his father needed to attend to this.

Once he became viscount, he would have to be host all of the time. Not to mention, when something happened, he would be the one to take care of it. He just didn't want to do it yet. He wanted to focus his attention on Lucy.

His eyes gravitated towards her. She was sitting on the blue velvet settee, and her eyes had a faraway look to them. He wondered what she was thinking. He hoped it was of their kiss in the woods. Her cheeks were red, and she was studiously avoiding his gaze.

“What was that all about?” Levi asked, coming to stand beside him.

“There was a fire in London, and our townhouse might have been destroyed.”

“Sounds serious. I hope no one was hurt.”

“He didn’t mention.” Several members of their staff dwelt there all year round—a housekeeper and a few maids. His father hadn’t mentioned them, so Silas had assumed that they were well.

“Do you still intend on making good on the bet?” Levi asked, drawing him from his thoughts. “It is not gentlemanly to toy with a woman’s affections and it would be understandable if you went back on your word to Percy because of it.”

This again. I should really give up and tell Levi the truth. After all, Levi could be trusted to keep a secret. But Silas decided to do so later, when the two of them were somewhere that they couldn’t be overheard by Percy.

“I would never hear the end of it from Percy. I mean to make him eat his hat when I walk to the altar beside her.” Silas was far too proud to admit in the midst of company that he took pleasure in the thought of convincing Lucy to marry him.

There was nothing that he wanted more. They suited each other well. Not to mention, there was passion there—such that he had never

encountered before. He hungered for and desired her with his whole being.

Levi sighed, frowning in disapproval. “You always were a sore loser, Silas. It will be your own ruin.”

True, he thought to himself. He didn’t respond. His gaze met Lucy’s from across the room and he smiled at her, taking pleasure in the way her cheeks went red.

As always, she was the first to look away.

Chapter 14

Despite the viscount's departure, the rest of the day was filled with activities for the guests. Dinah stuck close to Lord Browning. It was clear the two of them were destined for the altar. Lucy was happy for her friend.

Meanwhile, no matter what Lucy was doing or whom she was talking to, she could sense Silas watching her the whole time. She avoided his gaze, for whenever she caught his eye, her mind returned immediately to the woods. Her thoughts were aflutter, fluctuating between wanting him to do it, wanting more, but also wanting to run in fear. She knew the only way forward would be her own ruin.

Lucy grew exhausted of constantly being in the company of others. It was during a particularly rousing round of croquet that she decided to slip out. She crept away from the group, heading towards the garden.

It was late afternoon, and the sun was beginning to slip down behind the trees. The sounds of everyone's voices began to fade into the distance.

She felt herself relax immediately. It was blessedly silent out there. The only sound was the breeze in the leaves; birds singing to each other in the fruit trees; bees humming, landing on the flowers.

She made her way along the path, heading for the maze, which was surrounded by tall hedges. A few days before, Dinah had been with her. She had known the way through, since she'd been walking the

maze her whole life. Lucy had no idea where to go.

Am I really afraid of being caught in there, forever? No.

Lucy allowed herself to get lost, both in thought and in person. She made her way through the maze, stopping when she hit a dead end, then retracing her steps to find the way out.

She was getting a little frightened, that she'd gotten too lost. She knew that eventually she would be missed. However, it might be a very long time before anyone realized that she was lost in the maze.

Her heart knocked nervously in her chest and she clenched her hands into fists. There were no markers among the hedges. They were all the same verdant green, seeming to go on forever.

She took a deep, calming breath and continued onward. Eventually, she would come to the end of it. She just wasn't sure when or how. Not that that was a problem. At least Silas was not there, tempting her to throw away her virtue, wrapped in his deliciously muscular arms.

Suddenly, a gentleman turned the corner, almost knocking into her. She nearly jumped out of her skin. Her hand flew up to her chest.

"Miss Wilds!" Mr Stalton said, smiling at her. Lucy swallowed. He was the last person one wanted to be lost in a maze with. She felt a wave of dread.

“Oh, Mr Stalton, I didn’t hear you coming.” *Has he followed me*? The though caused her a flash of worry.

“What are you doing all of the way out here, by yourself?” Mr Stalton’s smile was cold. Lucy’s nerves were on edge.

I could ask you the same thing. She moved to go past him. “Just taking a walk.”

“As am I.” Mr Stalton moved to join her. She paused, wondering how she could politely get rid of him. He was intruding on her quiet moment.

He moved so that he was standing in her way. “Are you having a nice time?” he asked.

“Yes,” she lied.

“It was so kind of the viscount to invite you and your aunt.”

“It was.” She wondered what he was getting at.

“I’m sure that it must be such a relief to be among unmarried gentlemen who are looking for a wife.”

“I can’t see how that has anything to do with me,” she replied, folding

her arms protectively. She didn't like the situation she had found herself in and tried to think of how to politely get herself out of it.

"You're so lovely," he said, raising his hand to touch one of the ringlets that framed her face.

She recoiled from his touch. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

The smile slipped from his face at her angry tone. "I was just—"

Silas turned the corner just then—his face was a mask of fury. "Percy! What do you think you are doing? Go away," he snapped.

"I meant no harm." Mr Stalton held up his hands. "I thought Miss Wilds—"

"You thought wrong," she murmured, relieved to have been saved from Mr Stalton's very unwanted attentions.

"Come, Percy," Silas growled, grabbing Mr Stalton by the arm. "There will be no more sneaking up on ladies in my home."

The two gentlemen walked off, Percy leading the way while Silas made sure that he wasn't going to lurk in the hedge maze.

Lucy felt a bright feeling welling up inside of her. Relief, mixed with

an utter preference towards Silas. She was, though she would never have thought it possible, more attracted to him than ever.

She sighed, folding her arms as she walked. She could hear Silas talking angrily in front of her, so she followed his voice to the end of the maze.

She paused just around the bend which led out of the maze. Lucy closed her eyes, swallowing the painful lump that had formed in her throat.

Lucy was even more confused than she had been before. She wished she'd never come there. She would have been able to live her quiet life, without disruption.

But now, she would always have to live with regret. Because she now knew that there was a gentleman out in the world, one who she could possibly have fallen in love with.

It can never be. I have to get out of here before it becomes even worse.

Silas marched Percy out of the maze. He was livid. He had seen Lucy leave the group and head into the gardens. He had then seen Percy follow her. He had chased after them both immediately.

"How dare you?" he growled. He gripped Percy's shoulder with his

hand, forcing him to walk ahead of him.

“How dare I what?”

“I am growing tired, Percy, of rescuing women from you,” Silas snapped. “I will not allow you to haunt Miss Wilds’ steps.”

“Why? You don’t care for her.” Percy’s eyes glinted. He was grimacing at Silas.

“She shouldn’t have to fear walking through my father’s gardens,” Silas replied. “No woman or lady should.”

“I meant no harm,” Percy claimed, stopping and turning towards Silas. They had left the maze and were almost at the end of the gardens. From where they stood, they could hear the party, where the guests were still engaged in a croquet match on the lawns.

“That remains to be seen,” Silas replied.

“Really, Silas. I thought we were friends.”

“You make it very difficult, Percy,” Silas told him. “Especially when you corner women who aren’t interested in your advances.”

Percy smiled at him slyly. “How do you know that?”

“I just do.” There was no way in Hell he was going to answer that. He hated Percy in that moment, and violently wished that he would just go away.

Michael came walking towards them then, smiling. “We were just wondering where our host had gone off to.”

Percy turned, holding out his hand. “I’ll endeavour to do better in the future, old chap.”

Silas shook his hand, though he didn’t want to. “You’d better.”

He and Michael watched as Percy walked back towards the croquet match, his hands buried in his jacket pockets. Silas glanced back towards the maze, but he didn’t see Lucy. He guessed that she had gone the other way—just one turn, and she would have ended up on the other side of the garden, by the back wall.

“What was that all about?” Michael asked.

“I found Percy attempting to corner Miss Wilds in the maze.”

Michael raised an eyebrow.

When Silas glanced back, he did not see Miss Wilds. He didn’t want

for her to overhear anything about the bet, on the off chance that she hadn't gone the other way.

"I also caught him trying to corner Miss Weaver, as well," he said, instead of saying what he truly thought—that Percy was trying to sabotage him by getting Lucy to fall for him, so Silas wouldn't be able to propose.

"We'll have to keep an eye on him for the rest of the weekend," Michael suggested. "If he does it again, then we send him away and never allow him back."

"Agreed."

He glanced one last time towards the garden. He could see Lucy sitting on a bench, looking away from them. He wondered if he should go and talk to her. He decided that she had likely gone out there to be alone.

He left her where she was, returning to the rest of the party. He planned to keep a better eye on Percy. He hadn't trusted him before, and he was only being proven right.

After supper, Lucy and Aunt Joan retired to their rooms. Since the ball had gone on until late the previous night, everyone was having an early evening. The next night, would bring more planned festivities. It would just keep going on—a constant whirl of activities designed so that they were all thrown together for almost every hour of the day,

and then late into the night.

Lucy had been silent throughout dinner. She was attempting to remain the mistress of her own emotions. After her encounter with Mr Stalton in the maze, she was shaken.

What would have happened, if Silas hadn't shown up? she thought wretchedly. It had been a close call. She had thought herself safe, but then found that she might not have been.

It left her feeling more upset. She was tired. She wasn't used to being so often in the company of so many other people. Without much chance for rest, she felt worn very thin.

At dinner, Mr Stalton had tried, constantly, to catch her gaze. Lucy had avoided it, her stomach turning at the thought that he believed her to be interested in him.

She sank down onto the bed and stared at her reflection in the mirror over the vanity, which sat beside the armoire. Her skin looked pale, with dark circles underneath her eyes. She felt sick to her stomach.

There was a knock on the door that led to Aunt Joan's room.

"Come in, Aunt Joan."

Her aunt entered. "I just came to see how you're doing. What a wonderful day this has been!"

There was a painful lump in the back of Lucy's throat. She could tell that her eyes were watery with tears as her aunt began to blur. She nodded.

"Yes, I suppose it has," she said, with an utter lack of conviction.

"Lucy?" Aunt Joan asked as she closed the door after her. "Is something the matter?" She pressed her cool fingers to Lucy's forehead, as if to see if she was becoming ill.

"I feel so horribly homesick, Aunt Joan," Lucy said. "I was wondering if we might leave early." She was trying not to cry, swallowing the painful lump in her throat that had been there since she had followed Silas and Mr Stalton out of the maze.

"But why? The party won't be over for another two days," Aunt Joan said. Lucy felt guilty. She knew that her aunt was having a good time. She could never tell her aunt about what had happened between her and Silas. She would never understand that Lucy couldn't marry him.

"I just thought that… perhaps it had been enough."

"We cannot miss the concert tomorrow evening, or the final ball," Aunt Joan stated, horrified. "Every rich noble from the surrounding countryside is going to be in attendance. You haven't worn your new muslin yet, and you look as pretty as a picture in it. We simply cannot miss it."

The thought of another two days of trying to avoid Silas, in addition to Mr Stalton, who made her skin crawl, was too much for her. To her own credit, Lucy burst into tears.

"Oh, my dear!" Aunt Joan sat down on the bed next to her, putting her arm around her. "I had no idea you were so sad. Did something happen?" She rubbed Lucy's back in circles, as she had when Lucy was young.

"I just… I'm so overwhelmed," she sobbed. "I can't do it anymore."

She was talking about Silas, but Aunt Joan thought she meant the party.

"I know that we aren't often among society," Aunt Joan allowed. "I should have known that it would be too much for you." She continued to rub Lucy's back. "I was so wrapped up in all of the festivities that I didn't see how you were suffering, my dear. Can you ever forgive me?"

Lucy nodded, sniffling. "Of course." She accepted the handkerchief that Aunt Joan handed her and began to dab at her eyes.

"I tell you what," Aunt Joan soothed, "we'll leave first thing in the morning."

"Thank you, Aunt Joan."

“There, there, my sweetling. I’ll go and talk with the butler about arranging for a carriage to take us home.”

“Thank you, Aunt Joan.”

Her aunt’s cool fingers touched her chin. Her brown eyes, so similar to Lucy’s own, stared at Lucy kindly. The only person who knew exactly how to calm her was her aunt.

“Not to worry. We’ll be home before you know it.”

With that, Aunt Joan got up and left the room, and Lucy breathed out a sigh of relief. She stared down at the monogrammed handkerchief in her hand. Aunt Joan’s initials were inscribed in blue, with a delicate design of wildflowers beneath it.

Once Lucy was away from Silas, she knew that she could begin to forget him. Another day or two in his company, and she worried she might be in too deep. Extricating herself before it went any further was the only way to keep her heart intact.

Chapter 15

When Silas arrived downstairs the next morning, he found both Miss Wilds and Lucy absent. Everyone else was there, however. He supposed that they might be running late, like he was. He sat down at the head of the table, grabbing a slice of toast from a nearby rack, then slathering it with butter and jam.

He rarely sat here, but given his father's absence, he felt it his duty.

"Morning," Levi said, smiling at him as he took a bite of his own toast.

"Where are both Miss Wilds?" Silas asked him as he took a bite. One of the footmen poured him a cup of tea. "Thank you," he muttered, mixing in some sugar and cream before taking a sip.

"They both left early this morning," Dinah said, answering for them. "I was able to see them off in the carriage." She was frowning a little, as she placed a bite of her hard-boiled egg into her mouth.

"Why?" Silas demanded, setting his cup down with a clatter. Suddenly, he saw his forwardness in the woods from Lucy's perspective. She must have told her aunt. Fear for her reputation must have frightened them both off.

"Apparently, Lucy was feeling unwell, and wanted to head home."

Dinah looked disappointed. “She did look very tired and pale.”

Silas’ mood was sinking into darkness. He had only himself to blame. He had forced himself on her, grabbing at her. He doubted that she’d much experience with amorous gentlemen. He should have approached her differently. He should have known to.

He finished his breakfast quickly and then left, heading for the study. He knew that he needed to speak with her—to explain everything. She needed to know that he was falling in love with her.

He cursed the fact that his father had seen fit to leave him in charge. If only he had left all of the hosting duties to Michael! If he had, then Silas would have been able to go after her, right that moment.

As soon as the final guest had gone, he would ride straight for London. Black Jack would get him there in less than two days. He would go to her house, and then prostrate himself before her and beg for her forgiveness. He would certainly tell her that he wanted to marry her. Of that, he was certain. Bet or no bet, he wanted the engagement.

But maybe he should just focus on a courtship. She wasn’t one to be pushed. Clearly, she was not above fleeing when overwhelmed. That was exactly what he’d do—a courtship. They could take their time! Fall in love.

As he reached it, the door to his father’s study opened and Percy stepped out. He froze when he saw Silas—a definite sign that he was slinking about, up to no good.

“What are you doing in there?” Silas demanded. He was still angry with Percy for cornering Lucy in the maze. He hadn’t given Silas a valid reason for doing so. Silas had wondered whether or not he’d been trying to thwart Silas’s engagement to Lucy.

“I was looking for ink, to write a letter,” Percy said, as slick as an eel. “I’ve run out.”

“You could have asked Mr. Fort, he would have gotten you anything that you need.” *Or you could have gone home and gotten your own ink*.

“I didn’t want to be a bother.” For Percy, this was beside the point. He was always a bother, though no one ever said it to his face. A slow smile was spreading across his face. Silas was trying to find something to say to him when he said, “It looks like you won’t be able to fulfil the bet.”

Silas sighed, then walked past him and into the study. He shut the door firmly, turning the key in the lock. He had no patience to be egged on by Percy Stalton. There, in the cool dark of the room, he felt devastated.

Why else would she leave without a word? I’ve driven her off.

Even though it was still morning, he poured himself a glass of brandy, sipping it slowly and cursing his own blindness. She wasn’t like any of the other women he’d pursued. She was different, and that was what he liked about her.

He had misjudged the way to get her to consider him. He would have

to approach her in a different manner. He still had two days to figure out how.

Chapter 16

Their house was silent when Lucy and Aunt Joan arrived back at home. The two women parted ways; Aunt Joan headed to her room for a nap and Lucy went up to the parlour. She walked straight to the curtains, throwing them open to let in the light.

Dust flew up, getting caught in rays of distilled light through the glass. Lucy sniffed, turning away from the window.

She breathed in the comforting and familiar scent of her oil paints. Her half-finished picture still sat on the easel by the window. The blue bowl still sat on the table, though the apples had been eaten during the journey to Thornbridge Manor.

She placed her finger against it, feeling that the paint had dried since the last time that she had done any work on it. It was smooth beneath her finger, and the canvas had a little bit of give.

She thought of the pleasant trip she'd have to the market, to pick up the perfect apples to replace the others. She loved going, wending her way through the stalls and peering at the perfect piles of shiny new apples and oranges.

It felt good to be home, standing among the quiet stillness of her own parlour. She could hear carriages going by outside. Light spilled through the window, which was a little dusty since she and Aunt Joan had been gone.

It was a relief to be back. She couldn't have spent any more time among the company at Thornbridge Manor. A four-day long party extravaganza was far too much excitement for her. Yet, she felt changed, somehow. She was not the same person she had been when she'd left.

Her mind went back to that kiss in the forest. Her cheeks coloured at the memory of how his hands had teased her into some sort of madness. *In time, I'll be able to look back at it and laugh. To think, that the heir of a viscount looked my way.*

She sank down onto the settee, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat. No. She was not the same as she had been. She was no longer wholly content with her lot in life. She now knew that there was a gentleman who she could fall madly in love with. He was out there and unattached.

But it could not be. If she gave him her heart, she didn't know that he could be trusted with it. It was better to have protected herself. Heartbreak was difficult to come back from.

Chapter 17

The rest of the weekend went by very slowly. It was agonizing, having to pretend that he was having the time of his life. Having to carry on polite conversation about the weather and the number of couples on the dance floor when his mind was full of Lucy. Silas was relieved when the final day came. He had just seen off the final carriage, filled with guests. The only one who remained was Levi, though he'd planned to stay the entire summer.

Even Percy had gone back to his father's estate. Silas felt drained after all of the responsibilities of hosting a mass fete. It would have been good if he could take a few days to rest. But there was no time. He had to get to London as soon as possible.

Michael found him at the entrance to the garden. Silas was standing, staring at the place where he had first seen her.

"How's it going, old chap?"

"As well as can be expected."

Michael sighed. "At least you can finally give up the bet."

Silas was still staring at the bench where Lucy had sat a few days prior. *I should have gone to her, then*. He should have made sure that she was all right, after being cornered in the maze by Percy. He could

only hope that he wasn't too late.

"No," he stated flatly. He was exhausted—more than ever before. He was tired of the man he'd been, up until now. He wanted to be different. He wanted to be a better man for Lucy.

"No?"

When Silas turned to face his brother, Michael was looking at him as though he barely knew him.

"No," he repeated. "Now, I must be off."

"Where are you going?" His brother's confusion was palpable.

"I have something that I need to attend to in London," he explained vaguely. "I'm leaving immediately." He didn't want Michael to know. He didn't know how Lucy was going to react to him showing up on her doorstep.

"Let me come with you," Michael offered.

"No," he insisted. "You were just there last week. I need to go. There's something important that I must attend to."

The groom was walking towards them, leading Black Jack along. The

large black hunter was saddled, and Silas' saddlebags were packed with clothing and food for the journey.

Silas accepted the reins, slipping them over the horse's head before he placed a foot in the stirrup and hauled himself up. He looked down at his brother, who was frowning.

"I wish you would tell me what the matter is," Michael said. "You're acting rather strangely."

Silas smiled. "It'll all be clear soon." With that, he clicked his tongue, gently pressing his heels to Black Jack's sides. The horse broke into an easy canter down the drive.

He planned to go as fast as his horse could gallop. He needed to see Lucy, to speak with her. He was certain that as soon as things were cleared up, then nothing would stand in the way of their shared happiness. At least, he hoped that was how it would go.

Chapter 18

The day after Lucy and Aunt Joan had arrived back home in London, they had gone out shopping. Lucy's gloves were worn, and Aunt Joan, eager to put a smile on her niece's face, suggested they go and buy her a new pair.

"It'll be my treat," Aunt Joan said.

"Aunt Joan," Lucy replied. "I couldn't possibly—"

"I dragged you all the way out to the countryside," Aunt Joan replied. "Let me do you a good turn."

Right then, Aunt Joan's eyes were on the kid gloves that were on display. "Look at these!" She picked up a pair that were the colour of fresh cream. They were lovely. "They're soft as butter!"

Lucy touched them, feeling the creamy, luxurious softness of the leather. She had never had such a fine pair of gloves before.

"I do like them," she admitted, though she felt guilty. Her eyes sought a much less expensive pair of gloves. She saw a pair of black ones that were less pleasing to the eye.

“Then you shall have these.” Aunt Joan beamed at her. She took the gloves back from her.

Lucy looked at them, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat. “Thank you, Aunt Joan.”

Her aunt smiled, touching two fingers gently underneath Lucy’s chin. She took the gloves over to the counter, where the shopkeeper stood, waiting to be of assistance.

Lucy waited, meanwhile perusing the other wares in the shop. There were luxurious cashmere scarves, silk gloves. She touched the soft fabric of a scarf. It felt like a cloud, stolen from the sky.

“Lucy? Lucy Wilds! It *is* you!” cried a familiar voice from behind her.

Freezing in place, Lucy turned slowly to find that Susan Hamm stood behind her. She was dressed modishly in pink, her ringlets framing her cheeks.

“Susan,” Lucy said. “It’s been a while.”

“It has! How have you been?” Susan pressed both of Lucy’s hands in her own.

“I’ve been well. And you?” Lucy was trying to find out if Susan was actually happy to see her. After all, Susan was the one who had stopped speaking to Lucy. She would have thought that her former

friend would have avoided her.

"I've been extraordinarily well. It's so good to see you," Susan remarked, letting go of Lucy's hands. "I've missed our conversations. No one can rival your wit and intelligence."

Lucy felt her cheeks redden. *Then why did you forsake them for the company of others?* she wondered bitterly.

"Thank you," she murmured, feeling woefully unprepared for this sort of attention.

"You should come over, for my visiting hours. I am at home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from noon to four."

"Certainly." Lucy felt that Susan was only being polite. She couldn't mean it—not when she hadn't felt inclined to have any sort of contact with Lucy at all for the past several years.

Lucy smiled. Aunt Joan was walking over.

"Miss Hamm!" Aunt Joan said. "What a surprise!"

"Miss Wilds! It's so good to see you." Susan beamed at Lucy's aunt, with what Lucy read as relief. Aunt Joan was easier to converse with. She had none of Lucy's unfavourable qualities, and was widely liked and accepted.

“Well, we’ve got to get home,” Lucy said, ignoring the look that Aunt Joan gave her—one which said, *you very much know that we do not*.

“Of course, don’t let me keep you,” Susan replied.

Aunt Joan and Susan said their goodbyes, then Lucy and her aunt left, walking arm in arm along the sidewalk. It wasn’t far from the shops on Goldsmith’s Street to return home to their little house on Harley Street.

Aunt Joan was conspicuously silent. Lucy knew that she was thinking about the encounter with Susan and braced herself for questions.

“What were you and Miss Hamm talking about?” Aunt Joan asked as they walked. Lucy’s eyes were on a gentleman climbing out of a carriage to go into a solicitor’s office. He wore a top hat and fine frock coat. Like Silas, he stood very tall, and he walked as though he owned the world. He wasn’t Silas, however, and she was able to relax.

He’s still at Thornbridge Manor, she reasoned. *And will be, until the Season begins in the winter*. She felt relieved. By then, she would surely be out of any danger of being in love with him.

“We only greeted each other, said that we were both well. That was all.” She didn’t want to bring up Susan’s invitation to call on her. Aunt Joan would talk her into accepting and showing up.

What Aunt Joan doesn’t understand is that some people only tell you what

you want to hear—they have no intention of making good on their plans.

Back at home, Lucy settled in to do some needlework in the drawing room. She was working on a bit of embroidery on a pillow that had been starting to look worn. She'd sketched out a picture of a forest scene.

She decided to do blackberry bushes, which were in the cool shade of the trees, perhaps with a little snake curled up beneath them. It would be her little secret, she thought sadly.

Lucy didn't feel the relief that she had expected from leaving the Viscount of Thornbridge's home. Every time she was idle, her mind immediately conjured up Silas's face.

She missed him, she realized with a painful twinge. She found that she missed Dinah, too—particularly her conversation. She hadn't expected to find such pleasure in the weekend. Nor had she thought to find it so emotionally conflicting, as well.

Then again, it's probably best that I not see or hear from them again. Life is much more uncomplicated when lived in solitude.

She heard a knock at the front door. For a moment, she panicked, wondering if it might be Silas. She froze where she was.

He's followed us. He's going to demand to know why we left. And why I didn't say goodbye. She didn't want to have to explain herself, not when she had already told him that she had no intention of marrying.

"I'll get it!" Aunt Joan called out, her footsteps moving quickly along the hall.

In a panic, Lucy waited, hearing the sound of her aunt speaking with someone. It was a woman's voice, so Lucy relaxed. She listened as Aunt Joan urged the person inside. She listened to the sound of footsteps, in the hall.

She turned in time to see Martha Scriven, a friend of Aunt Joan's, come inside. Lucy breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mrs. Scriven," she murmured. "Are you well?"

Their visitor was about Aunt Joan's age, with silver hair and deep laugh lines carved into her good-natured face. She looked pale and deeply upset. She was clutching a monogrammed handkerchief in her hand.

"I have the most awful news," she announced, her hand over her heart.

"Sit down, Martha!" Aunt Joan encouraged, taking a seat beside Lucy. Martha settled down into the armchair across from the settee where the other two women sat.

Martha let out a deep gust of air. “Well, I know how the two of you are acquainted with the Viscount of Thornbridge, having just come back from his county seat.”

Lucy felt herself go pale at the mention of that name. She felt shaken, but made a valiant effort to compose herself. She folded her hands in her lap.

“Has something happened?” Aunt Joan asked, reaching for Lucy’s hand. She took it, feeling how her aunt’s hand shook.

“He’s… he’s dead,” Martha said.

Lucy’s heart ached for Silas and Dinah and their brother. They were, certainly, still out in the countryside, at the party, having a good time.

They don’t even know that the worst has happened, she thought with a jolt.

Chapter 19

Black Jack made excellent time. The jet-black hunter ran like the wind, rarely needing much rest, though Silas made sure to stop for the night at an inn just to the north of London. It was about noon when Silas arrived at the family's town home in London. He handed Black Jack to the groom, who met him out front.

He planned to stop in, change his clothes, and then head over to the home of the Miss Wildses, in Harley Street. He hoped that his father was in—he would be able to tell Silas the cross streets.

He paused, looking up at the damage from the fire. From the outside, he could tell that part of the home had been destroyed. The third floor, and some of the roof had been burned away. The windows looked like blackened eyes, with the glass smashed. A curtain, half-blackened, was blowing in the wind.

They were lucky, though. Several other houses on the block had been utterly decimated. They stood, like missing teeth, in ruins. It was silent as a graveyard. Usually, this street was busy, with people coming and going. Silas saw no one. Unnerved, he walked to the door, where he was met by the butler.

"Sir," Mr. Morton said, wringing his hands nervously. "We weren't expecting you so soon. We had only just sent word."

Silas frowned. "What can you mean?"

“Your father—he’s dead.”

Silas stared at Mr. Morton. He couldn’t believe what he had just heard. Through his shock, in the part of his brain that was still working, he realized that he was now the Viscount of Thornbridge. It was his duty to take over the viscountcy and to lead and care for the family.

A job that I am woefully unprepared for.

His father had been in excellent health when he had left Thornbridge Manor. Silas had presumed that his father would live at least twenty years more. Perhaps, even thirty.

“What—what happened?” he finally asked.

“There was an accident, sir. Your father was on his way to his gentlemen’s club, and he was run down by a carriage.”

Silas felt all of the air knocked from his lungs. The image of his father being trampled by a pair of horses pulling someone’s Stanhope Gig would torment him for a long while.

“Come inside, sir,” Mr. Morton said kindly. “Let me get you a brandy.”

Silas could only nod. The world was a blur through his tears. He

followed the butler inside, like a lost sheep. He didn't know what to do. He simply couldn't think.

Chapter 20

Lucy spent the week worrying for Silas, Dinah, and even their brother, Michael, who she did not know as well as the other two. Lucy remembered her own parents' deaths, and how devastated she had been at their loss. The news had spread of the late Viscount's death. Lucy prepared for the funeral, making sure that she looked neat.

She wore a simple black muslin and pulled her hair back in a high bun, eschewing curls framing her cheeks. When she looked down at her hands, they shook. She pulled on her new gloves.

She was nervous to see Silas. She ached for him, and for his family. Lucy was very sorry that Lord Thornbridge had died so suddenly. He had been kind to her.

Aunt Joan was devastated by his loss. Her aunt had certainly considered him a friend. Lucy knew there was no excuse she could make to get out of this. Avoiding Silas was beside the point.

She was going. That was that. Aunt Joan needed her support, and Lucy owed it to Dinah to show up. She would have to see him. It might hurt, she knew, for she would never be able to have him. Not in the way that he wanted her. She could never marry.

The two Miss Wildses arrived at the church, where the family had formed a receiving line. She and Aunt Joan waited to greet them. She could see him, though he hadn't noticed her yet. He looked pale and sad, though he still looked immensely handsome.

Now that I've seen him, she assured herself. *It won't seem so bad.*

The wait was, ultimately, to her advantage. She had time to become mistress over her own emotions while she stood in line.

When Lucy and Aunt Joan neared them, Dinah cried out. Their brother, Michael, had stepped aside with the reverend. Lucy could feel the weight of Silas's gaze, but she focused on Dinah.

"Lucy! Miss Wilds!" She held out her hands, and Lucy pressed them.

"I'm so sorry," she said, knowing that it wasn't enough. Nothing she could say could ease her friend's pain.

Dinah nodded, and her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you for coming," she said. "It's good to see your kind, friendly faces." She looked at Aunt Joan, including her.

"Oh, Miss Sweet," Aunt Joan said, her voice quavering with grief.

Lucy had finally turned towards Silas. Their eyes met, and she felt something akin to an electric shock. He was clearly gripped by grief.

He bowed to her.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “Both of you.” His eyes were on her, as though he was trying to communicate something further. Lucy looked down at her feet, trying to think of something to say, but her mind was blank. Luckily, Michael returned, and Aunt Joan took over the conversation.

“I remember your father in his younger days,” Aunt Joan said. “He and your mother were so much fun. Always throwing parties. I remember that your father gave your mother the most beautiful ring, but she had to find it first.”

The siblings all laughed, though it was with great sadness.

“That certainly sounds like our father,” Dinah said.

Aunt Joan nodded, dabbing at her eye with her handkerchief. “Indeed, it was! He presented her with a treasure map, and the two of us together—Amelia and I—we had to find the ring, which was buried under a tree on the country property.”

“What ring?” Dinah asked.

“It was one with a pearl in it,” Aunt Joan said.

“I have that very ring!” Dinah cried. “To think that I never knew the story that came with it.”

Lucy met Silas' gaze. His eyes softened, and she felt like he wanted to tell her something, but still wasn't able to. They were surrounded by a wave of darkly dressed people. Lucy felt a measure of relief, because whatever it was, she could never reply in a way that he wanted.

"We should get going," Lucy said, nudging Aunt Joan gently. "We have to find our seats." There was still quite a large crowd behind them, and the funeral was set to start soon.

"I'll call on you," Dinah promised her. "As soon as things are settled."

"I look forward to it," Lucy said. "Come anytime. I'm always home."

She smiled at Silas, but couldn't read his look. Though she wanted to see him again, she knew that it was a bad idea. Whenever they were alone, she couldn't help herself. She let him take liberties with her, ones that she enjoyed. Who knew how it would end? She couldn't afford to take the risk. She curtsied, then took her aunt's arm, ferrying her toward the last row of pews.

The Viscount's funeral was a sombre and staid occasion—one that didn't suit the kind, warm person that he had been. Lucy's heart was pounding the whole time. Even with a whole room filled with people in between them, Silas' presence was like a bright beacon.

She could see the back of his head from where she sat. She could almost feel him, wanting to turn around to look at her.

Afterward, the family was going to the gravesite for the burial. It was to be a private moment. So, Lucy and Aunt Joan left, walking through the streets on their way back home in silence. It was just starting to rain, the sky dark and forbidding above them.

“Well, at least he spent his last weekend alive throwing a party,” Aunt Joan mused sadly. “It was certainly his favourite thing to do.”

“Indeed,” Lucy agreed.

Her mind was still on Silas. Inside of herself, she was at war. She didn’t know which to want—for him to vanish from her life entirely, or for him to show up at her door.

Chapter 21

His father's funeral dragged by. Silas couldn't believe the finality of it all. How quickly Josiah had slipped away, leaving him in charge. The Sweet siblings, after the funeral, headed back to the house that they were renting while their town home was being renovated following the fire.

The house was already full of guests. It was overwhelming. Michael and Dinah waded in, talking to all of the black-clothed funeral-goers.

Silas found himself looking hopefully for Lucy. He didn't see her. Disappointment flooded him. No doubt, she and her aunt had returned home after the service.

Now that he had seen her, he picked up on the gentle softening of her brown eyes as she had turned them on him. She certainly cared for him, but she had fled from Thornbridge Manor.

He wanted to confront her, to ask her why, to demand she to agree to allow him to court her. But not that day. Not on the day that he had buried his father.

Instead, he grabbed a bottle of bourbon off of the refreshments table and went up to the study, where he closed the door.

The room was filled with a massive, empty desk and a few armchairs.

He sat down in one of them and began to take gulps of the bourbon, letting the alcohol blur the pain that he was in.

His brother found him there, a long while later. “I was wondering where you’d gone off to. You do know that we have a ton of guests, all of them asking for you, don’t you?”

Silas said nothing, just handed over the bottle. Michael took a swig of it, then sat down in the chair across from him. The leather creaked as he sat down.

“You know that you’re going to have to change,” Michael said.

Silas turned towards him. “Yes, I know.” It had been the only other thing occupying his time of late—worrying how he was going to do it all.

“You’re the Viscount of Thornbridge, and not only do I depend on you, Dinah does, too.”

“Yes.” He held his hand out for the bottle and Michael handed it over. Silas took another sip, then passed it back to his brother. “I won’t let you down, Michael. I promise.”

His brother nodded. Michael’s face was grim as he stared at Silas. “I’ll help you,” he offered.

“Thank you.”

Silas turned the corners of his lips upward in an attempt to smile. He knew that he was failing, but he wanted his brother to know that he was grateful to him, grateful for his support. Slowly, his brother nodded. They both sat in silence. Silas knew he was going to have to become someone else. He was in charge, now. He needed to prove himself to his brother.

I just wish that I'd had another year or two, at least.

There was nothing to be done, though. Their father was gone, leaving Silas in charge. The only thing that he could do was to endeavour to do his best.

"I'll head to the solicitor's in the morning," he told Michael.

Chapter 22

A few weeks passed, and Lucy spent them at home. She and Aunt Joan settled back into their usual routines, with Aunt Joan leaving the house to do charity work or to visit her friends (of whom she had many), while Lucy stayed at home, reading or painting.

Lucy assumed that she would never see Silas again. Perhaps, only in passing, when she went to visit Dinah. She allowed herself to feel relief about the situation. The mourning period for the Sweet family would put Lucy in the clear, with plenty of time for her to fall out of any sort of feelings that she once had for Silas.

She was just putting the finishing touches on her painting of the apples. She was quite pleased with the results and planned to place it in the tiny dining room, where she and Aunt Joan took their meals. It would look cheerful over the red brick fireplace. At the moment, they had a horrible painting that Lucy had done when she was just starting out—a bowl of peaches that looked sad.

Far off, there was a knock on the front door. Her heart rate sped up as her mind came to the conclusion that it must be Dinah, who had promised to call. Perhaps, she had brought Silas, as well. That thought caused Lucy to panic.

She wasn't prepared for such a visit. Her hair was pulled back in a simple bun, and she was dressed in one of her plainest grey muslins. She smoothed her skirts, pulling off her paint-splattered smock as she walked quickly to open the door. To her surprise, Susan Hamm stood there.

“Lucy!” she greeted. “You haven’t called, so I thought I’d call on you.”

“I—I’m sorry,” Lucy said. “I’ve been finishing a painting. Do come inside. I can fix some tea, if you’d like.”

“Yes, please.” Susan smiled. She was wearing a very fine dress of mauve, which made Lucy feel drab beside her.

“We haven’t a servant,” she explained. It had been several years since they’d had one, in an effort to save money. “You can wait in the parlour, if you’d like, while I go and fetch the tea-things.”

“I can come with you,” Susan offered. “I can help, or just keep you company.”

“Thank you.” Lucy knew that Susan had never boiled herself water for tea before. Her father was a well-to-do London solicitor, who had always been able to keep a housekeeper, a cook, and several housemaids.

They stood awkwardly in the kitchen while the water heated. Lucy made sure to keep up a steady stream of activities, fetching different things and setting them onto the little silver tray that had once been her mother’s.

As soon as the water was boiling, she poured it into the pot, which Susan had filled with tea leaves. They both went to sit in the parlour, Lucy setting the tray down on the coffee table. In silence, they sat

across from each other, waiting for the tea to steep.

Susan was looking around the room. Lucy waited patiently, wondering how it must look to her. She and Aunt Joan hadn't been able to do any updates to it. They just kept it clean.

"It certainly has been a long time since I've been in this room," Susan commented with a smile. "It hasn't changed at all."

"No," Lucy agreed, awkwardly. "We keep it clean and tidy, though there's not much money for changing things."

"It's such a dear, cosy room. I'm glad that it's the same," Susan remarked.

It had been a long time since Lucy had had a friend over, and the mere presence of someone new in the home made her feel on edge.

Not to mention, without the jovial and talkative presence of Aunt Joan, Lucy wasn't sure what to do. So, she poured them both cups of tea.

Susan, herself, seemed uncomfortable. They both sipped their tea in silence.

Lucy wanted to ask Susan what had happened, why she had stopped calling on Lucy. She wondered how to say it without seeming bitter. She sat, staring into the distance while she attempted to work up the

nerve.

"Well," Susan said, suddenly breaking the silence. "Thank you for the tea, but I must be on my way. My mother expects me home soon."

Lucy smiled, secretly relieved. "Thank you for calling on me," she said. "I don't have many visitors."

Lucy showed Susan to the door. They both said goodbye, without making any plans to do it again soon. When Lucy closed the door after Susan, she let out a deep breath, leaning her forehead against the door.

That was painful! Why did she come? she wondered wretchedly. *Why don't people ever say what they mean?*

She walked back up the stairs and gathered the teacups, setting them onto the tray. She took it down into the kitchen, where she began to wash everything. Her mind was full, wondering why Susan had come. Her aunt found her there when she got home.

"Did you have a visitor?" Aunt Joan asked.

"Susan Hamm called."

"Oh! How lovely!"

“It was awkward. It went horribly. I don’t know why she came at all.”

“Lucy.” The sad tone of her aunt’s voice bit at her.

Lucy turned away from the wash basin to find her aunt looking at her with concern.

“What is it?”

“I’m worried that you spend so much time on your own,” she replied gently. “You’re becoming a hermit, for absolutely no reason at all. Susan is clearly interested in rekindling your friendship. Why are you not trying?”

Aunt Joan always addressed her with patience and kindness. Lucy couldn’t possibly get mad at her. Not when Aunt Joan was speaking so reasonably.

“I will admit, I am feeling a bit defensive towards Susan,” Lucy said calmly. “But only because she was the one who ended the friendship in the first place.” Lucy and Aunt Joan had never spoken about it, not until now.

“Why don’t you find something to do?” Aunt Joan suggested. “What if you started looking for a husband, perhaps?”

It hit Lucy in the heart like an arrow. She was so torn about it. Part of

her wanted nothing more than to fall in love. However, experience had taught her that it hurt too much when the man you'd allowed yourself to fall in love with betrayed you.

"Being unmarried works for you," she pointed out. Her aunt sighed sadly, placing a hand on Lucy's arm. She looked her niece in the eyes when she spoke.

"I wish that I had married," Aunt Joan admitted. "While I wouldn't trade our time together for the world, and I am content with my lot in life, it would be nice to have someone to share my life with."

Immediately, Silas crossed Lucy's mind. The feel of his lips on her own. *Perhaps I shouldn't have dismissed him so quickly*.

There was passion between them. A fire that she knew wasn't commonly found between two people. After all, she hadn't had such feelings for Edward. She had, she knew, merely esteemed him. Which was why she was so terrified when it came to Silas.

Given how much Edward's betrayal hurt, she knew that if she allowed herself to fall for Silas, it would be a devastation that could barely be borne if he did something to lose her trust.

"I'll consider it." It was the best she could do. She certainly couldn't just show up on Silas' doorstep. Not when he was in mourning. She didn't think he wanted to see her, either. Not after she'd fled the countryside.

Aunt Joan smiled, her hand touching Lucy's cheek. "That's all I ask."

Chapter 23

In the weeks following his father's funeral, Silas did his best to transform himself. He knew that he was not, ultimately, reformed. After all, he could not become a new person entirely. He was still the same Silas, despite now having a title. However, he did his absolute best to fill his father's shoes. It was hard to do; his father had been a paragon of the perfect gentleman.

Silas and his two siblings had remained in London after they had buried their father. Silas and Michael were overseeing the repairs to their home and Dinah, not wanting to be in the country alone, remained with them. Silas had thrown himself into managing the family's affairs. He spent most of his days in the study of their rented home.

Several boxes had been retrieved from his father's desk in the London town home, which had been emptied out to prepare for the renovations. There were also several boxes from the study at Thornbridge Manor.

He had just opened one of the boxes that had come from the country estate to find it was filled with receipts from the running of the estate. Mostly, it involved feed for the horses and such. He came to one that was for a much larger sale, though.

Bill of Sale, it read. *10 acres purchased by Josiah Sweet, Viscount of Thornbridge. June 1812*. The month before his father had died. He perused it, looking for the price and the location, but found none. It seemed to have been hastily scribbled, as a reminder that it had been done, not as a record of the sale.

There was a knock on the door. Silas stuffed the paper into his breast pocket, to ask the solicitor at his next appointment to discuss the estate.

“Yes?” he called out.

The door opened and Michael peered inside. “How are things going, brother?”

Silas sighed. “Our father wasn’t the most organized of gentlemen,” he remarked. “But I think everything is all in hand.”

Michael stepped into the room, closing the door after him. Silas watched him curiously. He seemed to have something that he wanted to say.

“You know,” Michael said. “I’m proud of the gentleman you’re becoming, in the face of our father’s tragic death.”

“Thank you.” He didn’t mention that his lack of romantic pursuits was largely due to Lucy Wilds. He had found that he was no longer interested. No woman could compare to her charms. He thought of her constantly, wondered what she was doing.

“You’re really stepping up and taking on the role of viscount admirably.”

Silas smiled. “It means a lot to hear you say so.”

“I’m also pleased that you’ve given up your mean pursuit of Miss Wilds,” he went on. “Now, you can focus on finding a wife you have some modicum of respect for.”

Silas’s face fell. He watched Michael pull the door closed as he left and then closed his eyes, running his fingers through his hair. Following his father’s death, the bet Silas had made with Percy had become inconsequential. Silas had been too busy—first with the planning of the funeral, then with the handling of the estate and the renovations to the house.

Thankfully, Percy hadn’t spoken of it the few times that he had seen him. Silas wished, however, to enjoy the comfort that Lucy’s presence had brought him in the country. He thought about her all of the time, almost to the point of obsession.

As soon as I have all of this sorted, I will call on her.

Once Silas was finished going through his father’s papers, he decided to take a break in the parlour. He poured himself a glass of brandy, and then walked to the window.

Outside, the sky was a dark grey, the clouds hanging low over the city. Across the street was a row of townhouses, which all looked the

same as the one Silas had rented.

A hansom cab had pulled up to the sidewalk and Silas saw Percy climb out of it, then walk to the front door. He steeled himself, for he knew that Percy had come to see him, specifically.

“Mr Stalton is here to see you, My Lord,” Mr Morton announced.

“Send him in, Morton.” Silas waited, his eyes still on the row of townhouses across the busy street. He took a slow sip of his drink. He heard the door open, and he turned to greet his guest.

“Percy. Can I pour you a brandy?”

“Please, My Lord,” Percy said, smiling at him. It didn’t reach his eyes, which were hard, like flint. His clothes were rumpled, as if he’d slept in them.

“I’m not quite used to that,” Silas murmured, walking over to the sideboard and pouring another glass. Percy accepted the drink, then began to roam about the room, pausing to look at the paintings, the little statues that the owners of the house had scattered about.

“What brings you over here?” Silas asked, taking a sip and then walking back towards the window, which was open to let in a soft breeze.

He watched as Percy downed the rest of his beverage in one go. Percy

hissed, wincing at the alcoholic bite.

“I was wondering if you’d forgotten our little bet,” he said, finally turning toward Silas.

“Surely that hasn’t brought you here,” Silas replied. “After all, my mourning period has only just begun. Not to mention, I am now the patriarch of the family. I have a lot that I’m trying to figure out.”

“Ah, yes,” Percy said, coming to stand with Silas by the window, where a cool breeze was coming in. “And how is that going?”

“Rather well.” He didn’t feel the need to tell Percy any more than that. He was unsettled by Percy’s odd demeanour.

“Must be nice to be the master of one’s fate,” Percy said bitterly.

“I never saw it that way.” It certainly didn’t feel like Silas was in control of anything in his life. He hadn’t wanted the responsibility. He was now taking care of things all day long, until late in the night. He wanted to see Lucy, not go trawling through papers.

“I suppose you’ve got plans for your siblings, then,” Percy muttered.

“Yes.” Silas wondered what Percy was getting at. His questioning certainly seemed pointed, but Silas couldn’t follow his line of thought. “What are you trying to get at?” If he would only speak clearly!

“Have you considered whom you might marry Dinah off to?” Percy asked. “I could provide her with a comfortable home.”

Silas squinted at him, and his stomach did a nauseating flip at the idea of Dinah marrying Percy Stalton. Slowly, he smiled at Percy. “You’ve never shown any interest in my sister before.”

“Well, I always figured that she and Levi were an item.” Percy shrugged, but his whole demeanour was off—he was tense, as if spoiling for a fight and not asking Silas for his own sister’s hand in marriage.

“They’ve never been.” He wanted to know what Percy’s motives were, which was why he didn’t mention Lord Browning, who regularly called on Dinah. Lord Browning’s unwavering support to his sister during their time of mourning only proved to Silas how dedicated the marquess was to his sister. Silas couldn’t imagine forcing Dinah to marry Percy. He would never do it.

“He should have,” Percy said, sniffing. “With the sizeable dowry, and fifteen thousand a year after your father’s death.”

Silas felt like he’d been slapped. After their father died, Dinah received fifteen thousand pounds a year, for her care. It was an impressive sum, by all means. He set down his drink quickly before he had the urge to throw it at Percy. He was livid—Silas had never been this angry before. His mind was calm, though, coolly telling him to get Percy out of his presence.

Before Silas killed him.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave at once,” Silas said, his voice cold. “If you mean to marry my sister for money, then you are mistaken. I will never allow it to happen.”

Percy’s face twisted in fury. “You’re selfish, Silas. You think the world revolves around you simply because you’ve got the title and the money to do so. But you’re a coward.”

“How am I a coward?” Silas roared. “I’m not trying to marry a woman for her money!”

“You haven’t followed through on our bet. That’s what a coward does,” Percy yelled back, throwing his glass to the ground so that it shattered.

Silas saw red, his mind going blank with rage. Percy suddenly panicked, backing away from Silas. There was fear in his eyes, something which pleased Silas.

“You’re the real coward, Percy.”

Silas grabbed Percy by the shoulder, shoving him out of the room in front of him. The butler was out in the hallway. It was clear he’d heard raised voices and had come to his master’s aid.

“My Lord?” Mr Morton asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

“Show Mr Stalton the door, please.” Silas gave Percy another shove in the direction of the entry. “He is no longer welcome here.”

“I have never been treated like this by a friend before,” Percy said, catching himself before he stumbled.

“Our friendship is over,” Silas growled. “You will never return here again. I don’t want to see you ever.”

“You’ll regret the way you’ve treated me,” Percy called out over his shoulder as he was sternly marched to the front door by Mr Morton.

“Doubtful,” Silas muttered to himself as he returned to the parlour, where he poured himself another drink. He stared at the broken glass, which was shattered on the wall and the floor, brandy dripping down the wallpaper.

He thought about Lucy. He imagined her entering the room, dressed in the blue and white striped dress that she’d worn to the ball at Thornbridge Manor. He would always remember how she’d looked that night. He wanted nothing more than to go to her.

I wonder what she’s doing right now.

Chapter 24

At that very moment, Lucy was on her way to Susan Hamm's house, which was located only a few blocks away from Harley Street. She was dressed in the same blue and cream striped muslin that she had worn at Thornbridge Manor—the very one that Silas was thinking of, though she didn't know it.

It was her finest frock. She had painstakingly done her hair in a bun, using the curling iron to make ringlet curls to frame her cheeks. She was nervous—what if Susan didn't want to see her, after her frosty reception the other day?

Lucy had been thinking a great deal about her conversation with Aunt Joan about relationships and regrets. She wanted to do something immediately, because she knew that if she didn't start to change things, then she would end up very much alone and with regrets of her own.

Even Aunt Joan had friends that she visited with several times a week. Susan had been Lucy's dearest friend, at one point. So, Lucy was on her way to call on Susan. She wanted to clear the air, after Susan's disastrous visit. She owed it to Susan to at least part ways on good terms, if not renew their friendship.

She knocked on the sleek, cherry-red door. Mrs Vane, the Hamms' housekeeper, answered, recognizing her. She was an older woman with silver hair, and she smiled at Lucy kindly.

“Miss Wilds! It’s been quite some time,” she said. “Miss Susan is in the parlour. Come inside! She’ll be pleased to see you.”

“Thank you.” Lucy followed Mrs Vane up to the parlour. She was surprised that she wasn’t made to wait. After all, Susan would not be able to pretend that she wasn’t at home. This forced Susan to see her, a fact which set Lucy’s heart pounding nervously in her chest.

“Miss Wilds to see you, Miss Susan,” Mrs Vane announced. Lucy’s heart thudded even harder.

“Send her in,” Susan said from inside of the room. To Lucy’s surprise, her tone sounded happy, pleased. As Lucy entered, Susan stood up. She was smiling curiously. “Lucy,” she said warmly. “You are most welcome.”

“I thought that I would return your favour,” Lucy said. Despite Susan’s kind reception, her heart was still beating nervously, and she had a kaleidoscope of butterflies in her stomach.

Susan looked at Mrs Vane. “Would you bring us some tea, and some of the nut cakes that you made?”

“I’d be happy to, Miss Susan.” Mrs Vane disappeared into the hallway, her footsteps vanishing. Susan gestured towards the chair across from her own seat.

“Please, sit down. I must say, I’m surprised to see you.” She settled herself on the settee, arranging her skirts around her neatly.

“I imagine so,” Lucy agreed, sitting down in an armchair across from her. “I had thought that you were only being polite when I ran into you in the shop. I was really surprised that you came to visit.”

Susan smiled. “No, I really do miss you.”

“I was caught off-guard when you visited,” Lucy went on. “I apologize for my awkwardness. I don’t often see anyone these days. I’m almost like a hermit.

“I have to admit, I missed you, as well,” she said. “I don’t know what happened, to end our friendship. But I do freely admit that whatever it was, I am truly sorry for it.”

Susan nodded, looking down at her hands, which were folded in her lap as she gathered her thoughts. “I was enamoured with Edward Russ,” she admitted. “When I saw him with you, out in the public park, I saw how clearly the two of you were in love. I didn’t want to ruin your happiness, so I chose to back off.” She cleared her throat but kept her eyes on Lucy, speaking to her directly, with feeling. “I found it hard to be around you, when you so clearly had the heart of the man I wanted. It seemed best to put space between us.

“I naturally assumed that you two would become engaged. I was happy for you. I believed you deserved to be happy, after you’d lost both of your parents. I knew that, someday, I would meet someone else.

Susan looked up. “And I have. He’s wonderful, but as the months passed, I wanted nothing more than to rekindle our friendship. I

worried that too much time had passed."

"There was a secret engagement, but it never turned into anything more, as I presume you heard," Lucy explained, even though she didn't want to discuss it. Edward's betrayal still hurt.

"Yes," Susan agreed. "Now I know that Mr. Russ is a horrible man. He used you most horribly and shamefully."

"I want to apologize for not staying in touch," Lucy said. "It's as much my fault, as well. I hope that we can begin anew."

Susan smiled. "That would be nice. I'm very glad that you came today."

"Me, too," Lucy agreed. This meeting had already gone better than she had expected. Not only did Susan agree, it seemed that all had been forgiven. The butterflies in Lucy's stomach vanished.

Mrs Vane brought in a tray laden with tea and cakes. The two friends settled in to catch up.

"So, tell me—who is he?" Lucy asked, relaxing.

Susan beamed, seeming to blossom. "He's the son of a merchant," she said. "Just like my father."

Chapter 25

Josiah Sweet's papers were many. There were boxes and boxes to go through. Most of the time, Silas worked alone. However, Dinah and Michael had offered to help. In a joint effort to settle their father's estate, the three siblings were trawling through the papers together.

They had been working in silence for hours, sometimes pausing in their work to get a cup of tea or to eat something. Most of the time, though, they worked in silence, organizing the papers into piles. Some could be disposed of, while others were necessary to bring to the solicitor.

"Silas, look at this," Dinah said, breaking the silence.

Both of her brothers walked over. On the slip of paper were coordinates, written in their father's hand.

"That's not far from Thornbridge Manor," Silas remarked.

They all shared a curious look.

"What could it be for?" Michael wondered, voicing the one thing that they had all thought.

“I found a bill of sale in his desk a few days ago,” Silas said. “It was for ten acres, near to Thornbridge Manor. When I asked the solicitor about it, he knew nothing of any sale that had been made.”

“We will have to go there the next time that we’re in the country,” Dinah commented.

“We’ll have to be in London for the Season, at least,” Michael pointed out. “We won’t be out there until the spring.”

Silas slipped it into the breast pocket of his frock coat. “Perhaps I’ll head up there on a weekend,” he said. “There might be a reason that I have to go out there.” He didn’t know what, but he decided that he could go, just for some time out of the city. Already, he felt worn down.

“If you do, then one of us will go with you,” Michael offered.

“It might be one of Papa’s famous treasure hunts,” Silas mused.

“No,” Michael said, dismissing it. “It’s probably an addition to the estate. Father had been talking about adding some extra fields, for the horses.”

“We didn’t need anything extra,” Silas replied. “There’s plenty.”

“But why would he buy land for only a treasure hunt?” Dinah asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Because he did things like that,” Silas told them. “He liked to make a big deal out of things. What better place to hide something than a piece of land that we didn’t even know we owned?”

Michael and Dinah shared a doubtful look. The two of them shook their heads, smiling.

“Very well. Doubt me. I’ll show the both of you.”

Dinah and Michael left the room not long after. Silas stood, his mind mulling over things.

Mr Morton, the butler, opened the door. “My Lord, Lord Browning is here to see you. He requires a private audience.” He raised his eyebrows significantly.

Silas grinned. A private audience meant only one thing—Lord Browning was here to ask permission to marry Dinah. Silas was pleased. Reginald was proving himself to be everything that Silas had hoped. “Show him in, Mr Morton.”

Lord Browning was shown in to Silas’ study only a few moments later. He looked nervous as anything. He was dressed to impress—in a fine maroon jacket, with a snow-white cravat. Silas beamed at him.

“It’s good to see you, My Lord,” he said.

“Lord Thornbridge,” Lord Browning replied, bowing to him. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been well, My Lord. And you?”

“As well as can be expected,” he said, tugging nervously at his cravat.

“Can I interest you in a drink? Brandy, perhaps?”

“No, thank you, My Lord.”

“May I ask what brings you here, My Lord?” Silas prompted. He planned on giving Lord Browning his permission with alacrity. The man merely had to ask.

Lord Browning cleared his throat.

“I admit that that one weekend back in July, I had planned on asking your father for permission to wed your sister. Now, with the mourning period, I was going to wait, as is right and proper. However, I cannot wait six months before asking. I—I love her, and I will not be able to stand aside and watch her to wed anyone else.”

Silas grinned at him. Lord Browning sounded very much like a gentleman who was deeply in love. “Are you asking for my permission?”

“Of course!”

“Then you have it, wholeheartedly. I cannot imagine another gentleman who could love and cherish my sister as she ought.”

Lord Browning exhaled, smiling from ear to ear. Silas held out his hand to him. They both shook hands.

“Come. Let’s go and find Dinah, for you must ask her permission,” Silas said. “Although to be honest, my dear fellow, I have no doubt that you shall have it.”

They both left the study and went directly to the parlour, where the other two Sweet siblings were sitting quietly. Dinah had been reading a book, but the moment that she looked up to see Lord Browning, she set it aside and stood up.

“Dinah, my dear,” Silas called out.

“Reginald,” she said, beaming at Lord Browning. “What brings you here?”

Lord Browning walked over to her, taking her hands in his. “Your

brother has given me his permission," he said. "I know we can't announce anything for six months, at least, but I could not wait a moment longer. I love you, and I promise to cherish and care for you all the days of our lives.

"Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Dinah's eyes were teary, though her smile was brilliant. "Yes! Yes, of course!"

Silas and Michael shared a grin from across the room. Silas could only feel sad that his father was not here to witness this moment—he would have been so pleased with how things had turned out. Which reminded Silas that there was one thing that must be done, or else his father would have been deeply disappointed in him.

"We must celebrate," Silas announced, his gaze meeting Dinah's. She was smiling brilliantly. "I'll have Mr Morton bring us a bottle of champagne, and then you must stay to dinner, Lord Browning."

"I would be happy to, My Lord. Thank you," Lord Browning said, his eyes on Dinah. She was clasping his hand in hers.

Silas smiled and nodded. "I will go and arrange things immediately."

As he went in search of the butler, Silas couldn't help but think of Lucy and feel jealous of the happy couple.

He longed to see her.

Yet again, things prevented him from going immediately. It had been weeks since he'd seen her at the funeral. In another time, before he was viscount, he'd have just gone, all else be hanged. He was expected to be here, though. He had to be present, as much as he wanted to slip away.

Chapter 26

It was near the end of September when Dinah came to call on Lucy and Aunt Joan. Lucy was the one to answer the door and find her standing on the doorstep, dressed sombrely in black bombazine, though she still looked beautiful.

“Well-met, dear friend!” Dinah said, beaming at her. “I’ve missed you!”

“It’s so good to see you,” Lucy replied, stepping back to allow her entrance. “Come in. Aunt Joan and I have just set out the tea-things in the parlour.”

The both of them walked into the parlour, where Aunt Joan was pouring out cups of tea. Luckily, they had brought extra cups, on the off-chance that a visitor showed up (a regular occurrence, due to Aunt Joan’s wide array of friends).

“Miss Sweet!” Aunt Joan gushed. “It’s so good to see you.”

“I wanted to come sooner, but we had to wait for the first six weeks to be over before we could go out visiting. I still can’t believe he’s gone.”

“Neither can I,” Aunt Joan said.

“You two are my very first visit,” Dinah announced as they all sat down. “I wanted to tell you both the news.”

“What is it?” Lucy asked, wondering what it could be.

“Lord Browning—Reginald—has asked me to marry him.” It was clear that Dinah was pleased. Lucy was glad that her friend had good news to share, particularly after the devastating and sudden loss of her father.

“He asked during your mourning period?” Aunt Joan asked.

“Indeed,” she said. “He told Silas that he couldn’t wait six months. That he had to know we were promised to each other because he loves me.”

“How romantic,” Aunt Joan said. “It’s just like in a book, isn’t it, Lucy?”

“I’m so happy for you,” Lucy added.

“We both are.” Aunt Joan was clasping her hands.

“I knew you would be,” Dinah said. “But you must both keep it a secret, for we have to wait until it has been six months before we can wed.”

“For certain!” Aunt Joan agreed. “We will be as silent as mice.”

“How are your brothers doing?” Lucy asked. She was curious to know how Silas was faring, but she knew it would be suspicious if she asked only after his health.

“They’re both well, thank you,” Dinah assured her. “Although I worry about Silas. He’s definitely stepping into our father’s shoes, but he might be too focused on renovations of the burned wing and managing the family’s assets and public image. He never takes a moment’s break.”

“Well, he’ll learn,” Aunt Joan said. “I’m sure your father prepared him for it.”

“As much as he could,” Dinah agreed. “Although, Silas—we all did, to own the truth—thought that Papa would live for twenty more years, at the very least.” Dinah shook her head soberly. “None of us were prepared for such a loss.”

“How could you have been?” Aunt Joan asked. “We weren’t prepared to lose my brother and sister-in-law.”

“No,” Lucy agreed. That, too, had been unexpected. Lucy’s parents had been on their way to Bath for a few weeks when they were in an accident.

“How could we ever be? Life is too short. We must love those we have

while we have them," Aunt Joan said, sagely.

"I do have some happy news—Silas plans on throwing a party when the house is done," Dinah said. "I hope that both of you can come. It will be a small affair, since we are still in mourning."

"Of course, we'll attend," Aunt Joan said, answering for the both of them. Lucy's heart rate sped up at the idea of running into Silas in a social setting. She knew, given her friendship with his sister, that it was bound to happen. She didn't know, however, how she would be able to stand seeing him give attention to other females, particularly ones he would be bound to be more interested in—fine, genteel ladies.

They all talked a while longer. Even though they had met Dinah only recently, it seemed like she was a much older acquaintance. Lucy showed Dinah to the door when they were done. As Dinah tied the bow of her bonnet beneath her chin, she turned to Lucy.

"I hope that you'll come and call on us at the house we're renting while the other is under renovation," Dinah said.

Spurred by Aunt Joan's regrets, and her own desire to see Silas, Lucy beamed. "I'd be happy to. When will you be having visiting hours?"

"Every Monday and Wednesday, from one to four, starting this week."

"I'll be there on Wednesday, then."

“Good.” Dinah grinned. “Bring your aunt.”

“I will certainly do so,” Lucy assured her. She stood at the door, waving to Dinah as her carriage pulled away from the curb. Dinah waved back. Lucy remained there, on the front step, watching until the carriage had disappeared around the corner.

She was going to see Silas again. She found herself both nervous and excited by the prospect.

I’ll have to see him some time, she reasoned, though she didn’t know what she hoped would happen. She wanted to be open to finding love, for the first time in several years. She was still nervous, though. With Silas, she wasn’t sure what to expect. He was always a surprise.

Chapter 27

The family was gathered in the dining room of their rented town home on Upper Grosvenor Street, eating breakfast. Silas had plans to go and visit the solicitor, and then he intended to stop by his gentlemen's club for luncheon to while away the rest of the afternoon.

"What have you planned for today?" Michael asked Dinah.

Silas raised his teacup to his lips, taking a sip of hot tea.

"Both of the Miss Wildses will be calling on me," Dinah replied, clearly excited. Silas nearly choked on his tea. Lucy! The woman had been haunting his every dream.

"What time?" he asked, trying to sound cool and composed, though he was anything but. Slowly, he set his cup down onto its saucer. His hand was shaking a little.

"During my at-home hours. We didn't agree on anything specific." If his sister had noticed the change in his demeanour, she gave no hint of it, smiling at him serenely as she sipped her own tea.

"I'd be happy to see them both," Silas mused, already planning to forgo his visit to both solicitor and gentlemen's club.

Michael glanced up at him, sharply. Silas looked down, then over at Dinah. He knew Michael was going to ask him about the bet.

“Well, I’m sure they’d be happy to see you,” Dinah replied.

“Miss Wilds was a particular friend to both our mother and father,” Silas replied. “I believe that we should foster the friendship.”

“I agree,” Dinah said, smiling. “They’re both very kind, and the conversation is always pleasant.”

“That’s because they’re both well-read,” Silas pointed out.

“Quite right, brother.” Dinah smiled at him, clearly pleased that she had his approval. Michael sat, frowning. Dinah was the first to leave the table. As soon as the door closed after her, Michael spoke.

“You aren’t still considering that bet with Percy, are you?” he asked, as Silas had expected him to.

“As Percy and I are no longer on speaking terms, no,” Silas replied. “I am no longer a friend to Percy Stalton, as such, I will not honour any bet or wager that was ever made with him.”

“Then why do you persist in this madness?” Michael asked, his eyes wide in confusion.

“Because I meant what I said,” Silas replied. “Both Miss Wildses are kind and intelligent. And both mother and father valued their friendship. As the new patriarch of this family, it is my duty to treat those that father liked with kindness and respect.”

Michael squinted at him, then nodded slowly. He doubted Silas, that was for certain. But he also couldn’t deny that it was the correct thing for Silas to do.

Michael got up. “For myself, I will be at the gentlemen’s club,” he said. “I’ll be back to dine with you this evening.”

“See you later.”

Silas remained where he was, in a state of agitation. Today would decide it. He would get Lucy alone—away from her aunt, so he could find out, once and for all, if she loved him. Or, if she did not, if she could in the future.

Silas was able to cancel his appointment with the solicitor and reschedule for the following morning. When Miss Lucy Wilds and her aunt arrived, he was in the parlour with his sister.

He greeted the aunt first, even though his whole focus was on Lucy. He was hyperaware of her.

“Miss Wilds,” he said, bowing to her. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you, Lord Thornbridge,” the aunt said, curtsying.

His heart pounding in his chest, he then turned to Lucy. She was dressed in green, her hair styled modishly in curls around her face. He felt the surge of electricity that drew him towards her. He took her hand, pressing it in his as he bowed to her. She blushed as she curtsied, and he watched as she rose, her gaze meeting his. He smiled at her.

“It’s good to see you,” he said, meaning it very much.

“You as well, Lord Thornbridge.”

Their eyes met, and it felt like he’d been struck by lightning. She smiled at him, and he knew: she cared about him, still. She had never stopped. Now came the tricky part—getting her alone so he could speak to her.

“Tell me all about your wedding,” the aunt was saying to Dinah. The two of them were settling down onto the settees.

“I was wondering,” Silas mused in a low voice, “if you’d be interested in seeing my family’s collection of art.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Unaccompanied?”

“Yes,” he whispered. He had never been so nervous before, but the import of his private audience with her was extreme. Both of their futures hinged upon it. For if she told him that she would never want to see him again, he would leave her be. If that was what she truly wished, he would leave her alone. He didn’t think she would, however.

“Aunt Joan, Lord Thornbridge has offered to show me his family’s art,” Lucy said.

“Oh, Lucy!” Dinah gushed. “You must! I was telling Silas all about your work, just before you both arrived.” Lucy had shown Dinah her work the day before.

“Aunt Joan is quite done in from our walk,” Lucy said, giving Silas exactly what he had wanted. Which meant that she wanted it, as well. He felt a great welling up of joy.

“Indeed,” her aunt said. “I trust Lord Thornbridge will act as a gentleman ought.” She gave Silas a significant look, much like any parental figure would give any besotted gentleman.

Though I make no real promises to do so, he thought, recalling the day he’d pushed her niece to the trunk of a tree and kissed her, his hands roving over her body.

“Miss Wilds, I am honoured by your trust in me,” he said, bowing. “I

will endeavour to deserve it." It was the best he could do, given the circumstances.

He offered Lucy his arm. She placed her hand on it, and he led her from the room. His pulse was racing, and he wondered what to say to her. There was so much that he wanted to say, but he feared she would run from him.

He took her up to the room where he'd had the paintings from their London home stored while the renovations were being done. They were, for the most part, wrapped in sheets, to protect them.

"I had them brought here while the house is being repaired after the fire," he said, pulling several of the sheets away so she could look at the work. "As you can see, we have quite a bit of baroque work."

"It's lovely," she commented, her eyes drinking in the sight of them. She let go of his arm, to step closer. He stood, revelling in the sight of her, so long missed and wished for. She was studying a work of a forest. Sunlight streamed through the leaves, causing a small glade to almost glow with a heavenly aura.

At the centre was a young nymph, her pale hair loose over her shoulders. In her hands, she clutched a bunch of flowers, and she wore a loose dress that bared her shoulders.

"I love the painter's use of colour," Lucy murmured, referring to the luminous green of the foliage, the bright jewel tones of the flowers in the nymph's hands and in her hair.

She turned to another—a Flemish work, depicting a bowl of fruit on a black background. “Oh! This is absolutely gorgeous.”

“We lost several pieces in the fire,” he lamented. “They were past the point of even restoration.”

She turned her gaze on him, studying him with her artist’s eyes. He was curious to know what she saw, and what she thought. “How are you faring, after your father’s passing?” she asked.

He swallowed the painful lump in his throat. His eyes teared and she blurred. “Not well,” he admitted. “It’s… so hard with him gone.” He missed his father. Even though they had disagreed with Silas’s life plans, there had been love and trust between them.

Lucy laid her hand on his arm, and he placed his hand over hers. There were so many things that he wanted to say to her. He felt far more comforted by her than he had felt by anyone else. Her presence was the balm that he had been missing, just as he had known it would be.

“Your sister expressed such pride over your recent change in character,” she said. “She says you’ve really done well in rising to the challenges that have been required of you.”

He smiled, thankful that his sister had spoken so highly of him in front of the one person whose good opinion he sought. As soon as everything was decided between them and announced to all, he would be sure to thank Dinah profusely.

“To be honest, my father’s death has caused me to think more seriously about all matters in life… including you.”

She tilted her head to the side curiously, her pink lips parting a little. He kept his hand over hers, where it still rested upon his arm. He was going to dare to take the jump, for he had everything to gain by speaking.

“Lucy, I think about you all of the time,” he admitted freely. “Over the past few months, I’ve wished that you were here with me.”

To his relief, she smiled, and it was like the sun was slipping in between the clouds, banishing them. “I’ve felt the same.”

He leaned in, pressing his lips to hers in a passionate kiss. It was clear that they had been aching for each other in the time they’d spent apart. His pulse thundered in his ears, and his skin tingled pleasantly as she responded to his kiss.

He rained kisses down on her, trailing them along her neck. She exhaled sharply, her moans soft against his ear. He lifted her onto the table, pressing up against her, and her arms wrapped around him, holding him to her. His lips found hers again as he drove his member against her inner thigh.

He knew that if anyone found them here, like this, she would be ruined. Pulling away, he placed his hand on her cheek. Her eyes were sultry with desire.

“Lucy?” he asked, breathlessly. His pulse was racing. He needed to

know, immediately.

“Yes?”

“May I court you?” He was breathless. If she said no, then he didn’t know what he was going to do.

Lucy bit her bottom lip, considering it. For a moment, he panicked that she would retreat or push him away.

“Yes,” she said.

Beaming, he kissed her again. “Good,” he muttered, his voice a low growl. If anything, his appetite for her was now deepened. He could sense the passion between them, unlike anything he had experienced before.

She was smiling. Silas was so happy, he felt as though he might be dreaming. At any moment, he might wake up, and this would all vanish. He had gone, in the space of a few moments, from sadness and worry to incandescent joy.

“We should head back before they start to suspect something,” Lucy murmured. “No one has ever spent this long in looking at a few paintings.”

“Are we going to tell them our announcement?”

She laughed. “We have to. We’ll need to be chaperoned from here on out.”

He raised an eyebrow. That was certainly a bit of a setback.

“Until the wedding?” he asked wryly.

“We haven’t even courted yet,” she said, blushing and smiling.

Silas grinned. That was Lucy—she liked to take things slowly. He respected her more for it. Everything that he had hoped for had come to pass. He felt like the luckiest gentleman in all of London as he offered her his arm.

Chapter 28

When Lucy and Silas returned to the parlour, Michael had arrived and Dinah and Aunt Joan were still there, talking. From the sound of it, they were still talking about Dinah's forthcoming nuptials to the Marquess of Browning.

"Oh good! You're all here," Silas said, glancing at Lucy.

Lucy felt her cheeks heat up and she smiled. They were all looking at them expectantly. She glanced over at Silas again, who was beaming at her.

"Lucy has agreed to extend me the honour of courting her," Silas announced, looking at Aunt Joan, who had gasped. "If you will grant me the permission to do so, Miss Wilds."

"Of course!" Aunt Joan said, her hands clasped. "Oh! I'm so happy for you both." The look of pure joy that Aunt Joan gave to Lucy spoke worlds.

"Silas! Lucy!" Dinah added. "You never told me!"

"Are you pleased, sister?" Silas asked.

“Very!” Dinah gasped, getting up and walking over to Lucy. She took both of Lucy’s hands in her own. “To think! When you two marry, you’ll be my sister!”

Lucy beamed. That was happy news, indeed. “I will find that absolutely delightful,” she said. The two friends embraced. Then, they all gathered on the settees.

“You must tell us how the two of you realized that you cared for one another,” Aunt Joan said, for she loved a good romance story. She would settle for a novel, but she preferred a true one.

“It was when we were talking, during the party,” Silas said. Lucy let him tell the story. She knew he would leave out the parts that were too racy for others’ ears. “I immediately knew that I cared for her, but it was the time apart and how often I thought of her that did it.”

Lucy noticed that Michael was frowning and silent. She wondered why. He caught her watching him and he smiled, albeit sadly, and nodded to her, turning his gaze towards his brother.

How odd, she thought to herself. She hadn’t ever spoken much to Michael Sweet. He had always seemed to be everything that was right and gentlemanly. His brow was furrowed in disapproval. *I hope he isn’t angry*. Though, she couldn’t think of a single reason why he would feel that way.

Unless he was jealous. Lucy thought she had seen him dancing with a very pretty lady at the party, during the summer. He had certainly never made any overtures to Lucy, so she wasn’t afraid that he was jealous in that manner.

Lucy knew Silas was courting her because he genuinely cared for her. But she knew, too—a viscount was expected to marry a proper lady. The advantage would be entirely on Lucy's side. There was bound to be talk among the ton.

Chapter 29

It had been a few days since Lucy had agreed to let Silas court her. She felt happy, truly happy as she hadn't felt since before Edward had betrayed her. She was certain of Silas, certain that he wouldn't do the same. She just knew that the feelings they had for one another were real. She trusted him implicitly.

That day, Lucy was wearing a cream-coloured muslin with a blue Spencer jacket. She had placed a simple golden brooch on, which was in the shape of a primrose. It had been her mother's. She put on her bonnet, which was also cream-coloured, tying the blue ribbon in a bow beneath her chin.

"Oh, Lucy!" Aunt Joan said, coming into her room. "You look like a dream."

"Thank you, Aunt Joan," Lucy said. "You look lovely, too." Aunt Joan was dressed in a soft dove grey. As was her habit, her hair was pulled back, hidden entirely beneath her simple black bonnet.

"Thank you, dear." Aunt Joan took both of Lucy's hands in hers. "I'm proud of you. To think that you and Lord Thornbridge had feelings for each other! Which both of you kept such a secret!" She laughed, shaking her head.

"Aunt Joan," Lucy said, feeling the need to explain. It was rare for her to keep something from her aunt. "I had no assurances that he even thought of me. I was so sure that I was never going to see him again."

“But you did! I’m so glad that Miss Sweet invited us over that day. And I’m so glad that I was too tired to go and see the paintings.” She winked at Lucy, who smiled. She was pleased that her aunt was happy. Aunt Joan had already been making plans for the wedding, even though Silas had only alluded to it.

There was a knock on the front door, and Aunt Joan went off to answer it. Lucy glanced once more in the mirror, while she pulled on the cream-coloured leather gloves that her aunt had given her. Her cheeks were rosy and there was a joyful sparkle in her eyes which she’d never noticed before.

She could hear Silas’s voice booming in the tiny foyer of their home. When she came down the stairs, he looked at her, grinning.

“Good morning,” she murmured.

“Good morning.” He held out his hand, and she took it. He bowed over it while she curtsied to him. Aunt Joan was beaming from where she stood off to the side, her hands clasped together and held to her chest.

“Where would you like to go?” Lucy asked Silas. She was getting used to being courted again. It had been several years since the debacle with Edward, and she was certainly out of practice.

“I was wondering if you’d like to stop at the lending library,” he suggested.

“We would love to,” Lucy said, glancing at her aunt.

“Certainly!” Aunt Joan agreed. “If we could afford it, Lucy would go nearly every day.”

“Then we must go,” Silas said. The three of them left the house, stepping onto the sidewalk. “We can take the carriage, if you’d like.”

“Oh, but it’s only a short walk from here,” Lucy replied, looking up. The sun was peering out from around the clouds. It was the perfect fall day, just at the end of the warmer weather, heading into the cooler time. The leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn bright red and gold.

“Miss Wilds?” Silas asked, offering Aunt Joan his other arm.

“You two go on ahead,” Aunt Joan said, shooing them both on ahead of her. “I’ll walk a little way behind, so you two can talk.”

“Aunt Joan,” Lucy protested, but her aunt shooed them both on again, waving her arms.

“I know there’s much you’d like to discuss without me listening in.”

Silas offered Lucy his arm, and she took it. They both walked a little way ahead of her aunt. She could feel her aunt watching them from a

short distance.

“How have you been?” he asked.

“I’ve been well.”

“I can’t tell you how happy I am that you agreed to allow me to court you,” he went on. Her cheeks grew hot and she smiled. Whenever he was near, a warm feeling pooled in the bottom of her stomach. He made her feel like a better version of herself—a happier one.

“I can’t tell you how happy my aunt is,” she replied with a laugh. “She speaks of not much else.”

“Good. I’m so glad you are so often reminded of me.” He flashed her a wicked smile.

She squeezed his arm, which was hard, muscular. She liked the solidity of him. He was so real, so whole. “When not talking about you, I think of little else,” she dared to admit. Her heart was racing, and she felt as though she were floating. She couldn’t believe that he wasn’t a dream.

His blue eyes sparkled, and he looked handsome when he grinned at her. A bit of dark forelock tumbled over his eyes just so. Lucy didn’t think he could get any more attractive, only to find that the light would hit him in a different way, highlighting something she’d missed previously, like the pale freckle on his bottom lip.

Sometimes, late at night, Lucy was plagued by fears that she might get hurt at the end of all of this. She knew, too, that Silas was not Edward. He was a gentleman of his word. Dinah had promised her as much all of the way back during the summer. And Dinah's approbation was something Lucy could depend on.

They arrived at the library, which was in an imposing brick building that Lucy had passed often but never been inside of. As soon as they entered, Lucy gasped. Overhead, there was a great glass cupola, which allowed natural light to spill over the interior.

It was filled with row upon row of high wooden shelves, which went from the floor to the ceiling. And they were all full of books. There was a sturdy wooden ladder, which had wheels on the bottom so that one could move it, to reach the books that were higher up.

The second floor was open to the first. Even this was floor-to-ceiling shelves. Lucy looked all around her, seeing row upon row of books, two storeys high. It was one of the most beautiful sights that she had ever beheld in all of her four-and-twenty years.

She glanced back at Aunt Joan, who beamed. She had her hands folded as she watched Lucy.

"Imagine how long it would take you to read all of these, my dear," she said. She turned to Silas. "You certainly know the way to Lucy's heart, Lord Thornbridge."

"I had suspected as much," he replied, winking at Lucy. For Aunt Joan didn't know about their first kiss in the library. Of course, Silas knew. He had planned to take her here for that very reason; she could see it

in his eyes. Places with books in them were sacred to them.

"I don't know where to begin," she murmured, drinking in the sight of all of the books. He led her over to the shelves.

"What sort of book are you interested in?" he asked. "You may choose as many as you'd like," he went on. "And you as well, Miss Wilds."

"I am going to go and find out if they have any copies of Miss Radcliffe's novels," Aunt Joan announced, and made her way towards the shelves.

"I had no idea your aunt favoured mysteries," Silas said.

"She does, ever since she read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* many years ago. She's been meaning to buy her very own copy of it ever since."

Lucy sighed happily as they meandered through the shelves. She had never felt so rejuvenated. She could have just walked around, looking at all of the books, for hours. She inhaled the scent of paper, ink, and leather. It was just as good as going to the art museum.

"So, I know that you like Defoe," he said, prompting her to talk more about her tastes. She was gratified by his attention.

"Of late, I've started to read Wordsworth," she told him. "As well as Coleridge." She and Aunt Joan could afford the little penny chapbooks that were on sale at the bookstore.

“Poets?” He raised his eyebrow quizzically.

“Yes,” she said. “Ever since you recommended Scott, I’ve been finding out my tastes in verse. And they so help with painting. I’ve made some interesting sketches based upon what I’ve read.”

“I myself have been reading more novels,” he replied. “I borrowed Dinah’s copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.”

She beamed at him. He had been thinking of her, just as she had been thinking of him.

“Then you should try Swift.”

“And you should try Alexander Pope.”

They grinned at each other and continued discussing books and their tastes as they made their way through the shelves. They both left with a small stack of books each, which Silas checked out for them.

Aunt Joan had found one of Miss Radcliffe’s novels to read, and then they all walked back to the little house on Harley Street. When they arrived, Silas pulled out the loan slip from the library. As he did, a paper fell from his breast pocket.

Lucy picked it up, seeing that it was a listing of coordinates. She knew what they were, though she didn't know how to figure out where they led.

"What's this?" she asked, curious to know what it was for.

"Oh, I'd forgotten all about that." He took it back, though he paused, frowning at it.

"What are they for?" she asked.

"Dinah found that in with my father's papers," he said. "They're for a location out in the country, very near to Thornbridge Manor. I don't know what's there, though."

"You should go and find out." Lucy's curiosity had been whetted. She was eager to find out what was there.

"I want to," he remarked, "but I'm needed here in London, and must put it off for the moment. My father was always enamoured with treasure hunting… He loved stories about men discovering ancient secrets, buried in the earth." He sighed, the smallest hint of a smile coming to his lips. "Years ago, he arranged treasure hunts for us, his children, for fun."

"It would be charming if he had buried something recently," Lucy said, her mind considering the possibilities of what he could have buried—money, jewels.

“It would,” Silas agreed with a laugh. “Though I think it unlikely. My siblings and I are grown. Why would he do such a thing now?”

“It is possible,” Lucy pointed out, remembering the story that her aunt had brought up at the late viscount’s funeral. “Don’t you recall my Aunt Joan’s story from the funeral? Your father hid a ring for your mother.”

He nodded slowly, with his brows furrowed. “It certainly is possible,” he replied. “Though I couldn’t say what it could be that he’d hidden there.”

“Curious.” Lucy was eager to find out, but it seemed that she would need to wait.

“Indeed.”

They spoke for a few moments more, arranging to see each other soon, then he left. Just like with Dinah, Lucy stood on the front step, watching as the carriage bearing Silas pulled away from the curb, then disappeared at the corner.

Lucy closed the front door, turning the key in the lock. She was utterly content, she realized. She was falling in love, and the world felt so full of possibilities.

Chapter 30

Silas returned home, following his outing with Lucy and her aunt, in a good mood. Everything that he had hoped for was coming true. His life with Lucy was going to be even better than he'd imagined. She was his equal, in every way but one—and that would be changed when they married and she became Lady Thornbridge.

As he thought about it, he could picture her stepping into his mother's shoes admirably. She was intelligent, bold, and graceful. Her artist's eye would benefit Thornbridge Manor in ways that he would never have thought of.

She spoke her opinions firmly. She would both challenge him and help him to manage the estate. She would be the best wife and partner that he could ever find.

Michael was in the parlour, reading the paper, and he glanced up when Silas entered. He didn't smile. Michael had been down in the mouth ever since Silas and Lucy had announced their courtship.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"I went to the lending library with Lucy and Miss Wilds," he said, showing his brother the books that he had brought with him. He set them down onto the side table, to read when he had the time.

Michael was silently studying him, his brows furrowed in a manner that reminded Silas of when they were young. Michael often pouted when he didn't get his way or disapproved of something that had happened. He'd grown out of it, for the most part.

"What's the matter?" Silas asked, settling into a chair. This would be a long discussion. He wondered what was bothering his brother.

"Are you still attempting to follow through on your bet with Percy?"

Silas' mood dropped like a glass bowl, shattering on a tile floor.

"I've not spoken with Percy since the day that I had him thrown out of our home," he stated firmly. "As far as I'm concerned, our friendship is over. I have no intention of honouring such a childish thing as his bet."

"Then, pray tell, why are you playing with Miss Wilds' affections?" Michael demanded.

"I see her differently," Silas explained. "She's my perfect match in every way. That bet that you speak of would have brought serious shame to our father."

"What bet are you talking of?" Dinah asked from behind him. They both turned toward the doorway, where Dinah was peering inside the room, frowning.

“Nothing that you need worry yourself about, sister. Just something between gentlemen that is, quite frankly, over,” Silas said smoothly, not wanting her to know of it. He cleared his throat. “Is Lord Browning coming over to dine this evening?”

“Yes, he is,” she said.

“Excellent. I’ll go dress for dinner, then.” He shot Michael a look, forbidding his brother from saying another word about it. He left the room as quickly as he could.

His intentions were above reproach. He cursed Percy for ever having started that wretched bet. Silas wished that he had never agreed to it in the first place. However, he believed this would be the last that he’d ever hear of it from his brother. At least, he hoped it was.

The very last thing that Silas wanted was for Lucy to be hurt. Now that Percy was gone, there was no reason to discuss the bet ever again.

Chapter 31

When Silas arrived at Lucy's house the next day for tea, he seemed distracted. Aunt Joan had settled herself in the corner to read her book, and it was quiet and peaceful inside of the house. The only sounds came from outside, where carriages moved by and people could be heard, talking while they walked along Harley Street.

Lucy sipped from her cup, studying Silas closely. His brow was furrowed and his eyes seemed distant.

"What's the matter?" she asked him, curiously.

He blinked, suddenly coming out of his thoughts. When he smiled, his blue eyes sparkled. "Nothing."

"Very well, then," she said, grinning at him. She just loved to look at him. She was beginning to learn his different mannerisms, to begin to decode what he was thinking.

"The renovations on the townhouse should be done soon," he explained. "I was thinking of throwing a party."

"Is that what furrows your brow with such concern?" she asked. Dinah had said as much a few days prior, when she had visited.

“Yes and no.”

“Oh.” She tilted her head to the side, waiting for him to explain.

“Well, my siblings and I were making the guest list this morning,” he explained. “Michael and I are in disagreement as to whether we should invite Percy Stalton.”

“Your friend?” Lucy swallowed nervously, recalling how Percy had cornered her in the maze.

“No longer anyone that I would call a friend,” he replied. “After I spent the whole party at Thornbridge Manor trying to make sure that he wasn’t cornering ladies in the halls or the hedgerows, I don’t think it wise.”

“Something happened, didn’t it?” she asked. “After all, you seem upset.”

“Yes. He… came to visit me, after my father’s death,” he explained, setting his teacup down. He sighed heavily. “He tried to convince me to marry Dinah off to him.”

“She’s not interested in him,” Lucy murmured, immediately recalling being trapped in the maze with him back in the gardens of Thornbridge Manor.

“No. He was just after her money.”

“Did you tell this to Michael?”

“I couldn’t say so in front of Dinah,” he admitted. “I didn’t want her to be upset. I mean, it doesn’t matter, for Lord Browning was sure to be on his way to ask my permission at any day, but…” He sighed again. “I simply don’t trust a word that he has to say.”

“Nor I,” Lucy agreed. “After he followed me into the maze, I wouldn’t trust him for a moment.”

“No,” Silas replied. “You certainly weren’t the only young woman that he tried to corner over that weekend. It was exhausting, just trying to keep up with him.”

“I’m going to get us some more tea,” Aunt Joan offered.

“That would be lovely,” Silas said. “Thank you,” Lucy murmured.

Aunt Joan left the room. They hadn’t a servant, which meant that sometimes, Lucy and Silas were unchaperoned. Silas was too genteel to mention it. However, it also gave them private moments.

He was frowning even deeper as he looked at her. He lowered his voice. “I’ve been meaning to ask you why you left so suddenly,” he said.

Lucy's heart hammered in her chest. "I believed that you left because of me," he told her. "Because of our kiss."

"Partly," she said. "I was… overwhelmed. I didn't know whether you would consider me seriously, and I was also determined to remain single."

"What changed your mind?" he asked.

"Aunt Joan said something," she told him. "It changed the way I thought. It also gave me the courage to start embracing change."

"Then I have a lot more to thank her for than I thought. I do consider you seriously," he promised her, taking her hand.

"I know that now. I didn't, then."

"From the moment we kissed in the library at Thornbridge Manor, I have been falling in love with you. I have never been so sure of a woman in all of my life."

"I feel the same towards you." Lucy's pulse was racing.

"Good." Silas looked down at their clasped hands and seemed to become lost in thought. He brought her hand to his lips, kissing it. Lucy felt the kiss tingling against her skin even after he had let go of

her hand.

Aunt Joan returned not long after, bustling in with more tea. Lucy and Silas's gazes met, the weight of their conversation stretching between them.

Later, she would go back through the conversation, when she was alone. To think that he had been falling in love with her since that moment in the library!

But then, she reasoned to herself—that had been the moment that she had started falling in love with him, too.

Chapter 32

Silas was in the study, reading, when Michael entered. Silas glanced over his book at his brother. Michael was, as was usual those days, frowning thoughtfully. He seemed to have a lot on his mind, though he didn't share it with Silas.

"Yes?" he asked. He had had a delightful morning with Lucy and was in a good mood. He didn't want to fight with Michael again. He knew that his brother doubted his intentions toward Lucy, but he didn't understand why Michael seemed to be on Percy's side.

"I wanted to apologize," Michael said, to Silas' surprise.

"I, too, want to apologize."

"It's up to you who can or cannot enter our home," Michael said. "I must defer to your judgment. I know that Percy is merely tolerated by all. I thought… I don't know." He shrugged.

"Percy wanted to marry Dinah for her money," Silas told him. "He got angry with me when I told him that he could not."

"He's been having trouble with money. He lost a great deal of what he had," Michael explained. "He's just seemed absolutely wretched, and I feel sorry for him."

“Did he lose it gambling?” Silas asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes. His father has cut him off until he pays back his debts.”

Silas sighed, his eyes on the page that he had been reading. “I hope you’re not planning on helping him too much.” To give Percy money was to kiss it goodbye forever.

“Not financially. I thought I might help him get honest work somewhere.”

“That’s a thought,” Silas mused, looking up at Michael. “You’re so good, brother.” He was a much better friend than Percy Stalton deserved, though Silas couldn’t say that.

“I do my best to be a good Christian and a gentleman.”

“You do.” Silas put his book down. “How do you think you’ll help him?”

“He’s educated, so there’s work to be had,” Michael said. “He would love to come to the party, though.”

“Why?” Silas was immediately suspicious. He had planned on enjoying the fete. If he had to worry about what Percy was doing, then he wouldn’t be able to.

“He wants to beg for your forgiveness.”

“That doesn’t sound like Percy.”

“Just think about it, will you?”

“If he agrees to do honest work to pay off his debts, then I will revisit this discussion with joy.”

Michael smiled, nodding, then turned to go. “Very well.”

Silas watched his brother, studying him. “Michael?”

“Hmmm?” Michael turned back towards him, eyebrows raised.

“Whatever happened to the Lady Arabella?” Silas wondered. “I thought that the two of you were near to walking down the aisle?”

Michael smiled ruefully and ran his fingers through his hair. “Alas, she decided to wed another.”

“Who?” Silas demanded, angry for his brother to have been used in such a manner.

“The Earl of Pennyworth.”

“That scoundrel?” Silas didn’t care for the Earl one bit. Though, he was rich as Croesus, and the Pennyworth estate was essentially a castle. The Countess of Pennyworth would have everything that she ever wanted, and more.

“Indeed. It appears that the younger son of a viscount is nothing to what an earl can promise,” Michael said, and Silas could detect the hint of bitterness in his tone.

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Silas wondered what he could do for his brother, to help him. Michael was always there, doing whatever he could in order to help Silas run the Thornbridge estate and all of its holdings.

“I’m only a second son,” Michael pointed out, shrugging helplessly. “I shall hold no title of my own. I shall inherit no land, and I shall have to work for what I have all of my life.”

Silas felt for his brother—Michael always helped with the family’s business interests. He did the lion’s share of the work.

“But you should be wed happily.” Silas wanted his brother to be happy. Michael deserved the title and all that came with it. It was merely his bad luck to have been born second.

“Perhaps. If I can find a lady who can be content with what I earn.”

Michael turned and left. Silas considered his brother, who always thought the best of others and always helped whenever he could. He hoped, for Michael’s sake, that Percy wasn’t trying to abuse his Christian charity.

Silas had the worst feeling of utter certainty that he was.

Chapter 33

Silas was out with Levi at the Spotted Dog, their usual haunt. It was a small pub in the London theatre district. Earlier, they had gone to see a Shakespeare play. Now, the two of them were drinking tankards of ale at a scarred wooden table in the corner, where they could remain unobserved while they drank.

The pub was crowded, and the loud hum of voices nearly drowned out their conversation. They both leaned forward so that the other could hear. It was a far better locale than the gentlemen's club that they were both members of. For one, they could talk without anyone listening in.

"Well, welcome back to London," Silas said, loud enough to be heard over the conversations. Levi had been at his grandfather's estate for the past few months, only leaving to attend Silas' father's funeral.

"Thank you," Levi replied, taking a sip of his drink. Foam adorned his upper lip. "It's good to be back. I always miss London when I'm not here." Levi then got lost in thought for a long moment. "The old gentleman believes that I'm letting the family down again."

"I doubt it."

Silas knew that Levi's relationship with his grandfather was fraught with tension. The older gentleman expected more from his heir. Levi was easy-going and lacked the killer attitude of his grandfather.

Silas glanced around, allowing Levi a moment to think. The room was filled with students, for the most part. They were all grouped around the tables and the bar. It was a merry gathering.

“Well, he believes that I should be trying harder to find a wife,” Levi said. “Though, I cannot marry for anything less than love.”

“You’ll find her,” Silas said. “I know it.”

“Grandfather thinks that I should try harder,” Levi replied. “That she’ll just magically appear if I attend more balls or show up for more luncheons.”

“Only if the lady in question enjoys those things.” Silas knew, from current experience, that one never knew when the love of their life was going to show up. After all, Lucy had appeared as if by magic, in his father’s library, at three in the morning.

“What have I missed?” Levi asked, seeming to shake off whatever was bothering him. “Any good news?”

“I am courting Miss Lucy Wilds.” Silas beamed at his friend. He hadn’t mentioned it in any of his letters. He had wanted to tell Levi himself, in person.

Levi’s eyes widened and he grimaced in disappointment. “Silas, that’s poor form. You’re a viscount, now. You can’t toy with a woman’s affections in this manner.”

“That’s the thing, my dear friend,” he remarked. “I truly love her, and I fully intend on marrying her. She’s the love of my life.”

Levi studied him for a long moment, a slow smile coming to his lips. “Well, that’s different, then. Let’s drink to that.” They both raised their cups, clinking them, then each taking a long sip.

“I’ll be right back,” Levi said. “Lord Potsmore is over there. He owes me five shillings off a bet that I’m due to collect.”

“By all means.” Silas grinned, gesturing for him to go. Lord Potsmore was the father of one of Dinah’s friends from school. Silas wondered how acquainted Levi was with Lady Violet. She was witty and vivacious—the perfect complement to Levi’s steady, happy character.

Levi got up to go over to where Lord Potsmore sat, leaving Silas to his thoughts for a little while. Miss Worthington caught his eye. Miss Leonora Worthington, she of the brilliant red hair and green eyes, one of Silas’ old flames that had flickered out.

“Where have you been, Silas?” she asked, sitting down across from him. She was wearing a vibrant silk dress with a low neckline. The daughter of a rich merchant, she had aspirations to be an actress.

“I’ve been in mourning, Miss Worthington,” he replied, hoping it would be enticement enough for her to leave him be. Her eyes were sultry, and the old Silas would have had trouble telling her that he was no longer interested.

“Yes, but you knew where to find me,” she said, running her fingertip along the back of his hand, something which would have worked on the Silas of old. This was not the old Silas, however. He was Lucy’s Silas, and he wasn’t even the least bit tantalized by Leonora Worthington’s touch.

“I’ve been courting another woman,” he told her. “I’m in love with her.” He meant it, with all his heart. He could never pursue another woman. Not when he knew that Lucy existed, and she loved him back.

“No.” Her lips were quirked in a smile. She leaned forward to accentuate her already low décolletage.

“Yes,” he insisted, averting his eyes with ease. He turned his gaze towards the bar, already considering another ale, when Leonora spoke again.

“I suppose that’s almost over, by now,” she replied. “Your interest wanes, as it does.”

“No, it isn’t.” He gritted his teeth. *How had I ever found her attractive*? he wondered angrily. All women were now compared to Lucy, and always found wanting simply because they were not her.

“I see. Now that you’re Lord Thornbridge, you’re too good for me.” Her smile had fallen, and she pursed her lips, pouting a little. “She must be a very fine lady, indeed, to catch your eye and then hold it.”

“Not at all,” he insisted. “She’s an ordinary woman, whom I love very much.”

She tilted her head to the side as she squinted. “Something’s different about you.”

“Yes. It is.” Silas felt different. He hoped that it was true. He didn’t want to be the old Silas anymore—profligate and wandering. He had responsibilities, ones that he took seriously. He wanted to be true to Lucy. That meant something to him, more even than words could express.

“Well, when you go back to being your old self, let me know.” She leaned in, kissing him on the cheek. Silas flinched.

“I don’t plan to,” he told her with a smile.

She grinned at him, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “When you are who you are, you cannot change,” she said. “People like us, we don’t change.”

“People like us?” He raised his eyebrow.

“People with passion,” she replied. “Libertines.”

Silas considered this. He had once been such a person. But Lucy had changed him, entirely for the better. She sashayed away, moving on to

another table filled with young people. She leaned in, towards a gentleman, and the two of them seemed to be flirting. She threw him a glance to see if he was watching and grinned when she saw his eyes on her.

He turned his gaze away, towards the wall. He wished that Lucy were there. This certainly wasn't her type of place. She would have hated the noise and all of the drunken banter. But he ached for her, as though he were missing the other half of himself. Silas sat, sipping his ale in silence until Levi returned.

"I saw you talking to Miss Worthington." Coming from Levi, this was a statement of fact. Had it been Michael, it would have been tinted with suspicion—a definite accusation.

"So I was," he replied. "Her charms can no longer tempt me."

Levi smiled at him. "I'm so happy for you. Are you ready to move on? We can make a stop at the club."

"I'm not interested, though I can walk with you," Silas offered. What he wanted to do was to go and call on Lucy. Though, it was late.

Silas parted ways with Levi outside of their gentlemen's club, where Levi was going to meet with the rest of their friends from school. Silas found that he wasn't in the mood for them. He wanted to see Lucy. It was an ache, deep in his chest. He would not be able to rest until he saw her.

He took a hansom cab across the city, to Harley Street. He got out, handing over his payment to the coachman, and then he turned, bounding up onto her front step.

He knocked at the door, then waited. From the street, he could see that someone was home—in the parlour, which was lit by a low, flickering light. The door opened, and he found himself face to face with Lucy.

“Silas?” she asked, her brows knitting together in concern. “What are you doing here, at this hour?” She was dressed in a simple, grey muslin. Her hair was pulled back, and she had a black shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her fingers toyed with the little golden locket that hung from a chain at her throat.

“I missed you,” he admitted, realizing then that it was likely later than he had thought. “I wanted to see you.”

“Aunt Joan isn’t home.” She sniffed, wrinkling her nose. “Have you been drinking?”

“Yes. Levi’s only just returned to London.” He leaned forward. “Please,” he whispered. “Let me sit with you.”

She looked at him, her cheeks brightening. “It wouldn’t be proper.”

“No,” he agreed. “It wouldn’t. But how I feel about you is hardly

proper."

She gasped. He leaned in, his cheek against hers as he whispered. "Please, Lucy."

Her breath hitched. She looked to see if anyone was watching. Seeing no one, she stepped back to allow him inside. He walked in, and she closed the door after him. *Here, alone*, he thought, pleased. He beamed at her.

He leaned in, pressing his lips to hers. When he pulled away, she was smiling up at him.

"I was sitting in the parlour, reading," she said, folding her arms.

"Lead the way," he murmured, pleased that she had allowed him entrance.

She walked up the stairs, and he followed. His heart was racing with the thought that they were finally, blessedly alone, for the first time since they had started courting. He sat down on the settee, enjoying the familiar and comforting sight of the parlour.

Chapter 34

Lucy's pulse raced. There was a now familiar warm feeling pooling in her belly. She was excited to finally be alone with him; it had been a long while since it had last happened. That had been the day when he had asked to court her.

She recalled how they had kissed, the heat of it. She knew, with certainty, what he planned in coming there. And she was pleased that he had come.

They both sat down on the settee. He sat close to her, the burning look in his eyes telling her just how much he wanted her. He was close enough for her to feel the comforting solid warmth of his body.

She swallowed, her eyes casting about the room. *I shouldn't have agreed*, she thought. *If any of the neighbours saw, then I will be ruined*.

When she looked at him, though, they were drawn instantly together. All worries about the neighbours vanished. Silas leaned in, his lips capturing her own. His hand was on her cheek, while the other one was on her waist. He tasted of ale, though he wasn't drunk. There was the hint of spice, too.

She kissed him back, her mind spinning as her body reacted. She was filled with want. She wanted more from him, more even than this. He moaned softly, and she knew that he wanted her just as much.

Lucy pulled away, panting. If she wasn't careful, she would lose her head. She had never known such passion and desire. She had never been so drawn to someone. Even Edward didn't compare.

Silas's eyes were soft. "What is it, Lucy?" he asked her. "What's the matter?" He reached up, cupping her cheek in his hand, then rubbing his thumb over her bottom lip. This gentle touch caused her to burn with desire. She wondered how he knew exactly what to do to make her feel this way.

"I feel like I've taken leave of my senses," she explained, looking away. "It feels like it happens a lot with you."

"You know that I plan to marry you."

Their eyes met, and she smiled. "Yes, I know."

"I would never allow you to be ruined," he said.

"Why did you come here?" she asked. "I thought that you were going to be out with Mr. Wilmington." He had told her as much earlier that day, when he had called on her.

"I ran into an old flame," he explained. Lucy panicked. "It's a flame that had long been out. When I saw her, I was reminded of how much I love you."

“You love me?” She knew she was beaming. It was the first time that he’d said he was in love, and not merely falling in love. He smiled back, reaching up to push a stray strand of hair behind her ear, his fingertip trailing across her skin.

“I love you,” he replied, leaning in to kiss her again. She threw her arms around his neck, kissing him back with fervour.

Lucy had never been so happy in all her life. She couldn’t believe that this was happening. It all seemed too good to be true… but it was real. All of it. She allowed herself to become swept away.

Finally, he pulled away. He kissed her chastely on her cheekbone. She felt her skin tingle at the touch, and she felt that kiss long after he’d gone.

“I should go,” he said, his thumb caressing her cheek. “If I stay too much longer, I don’t think that I’ll be able to control myself.”

“Nor I,” she agreed.

“Heaven forbid, your aunt should come home and find us here, alone,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

She laughed. “Indeed,” she agreed. “It would be hard to explain.”

“I love you, Lucy.”

“I love you, too.” The declaration felt right. Everything was going so well, flowing like a smooth, well-travelled path, one that they were both walking down together.

What surprised her the most was how easy it was. It wasn’t frightening in the least. There was no uncertainty. She felt completely secure. What was more, she felt cherished, appreciated.

She showed him to the door, and he vanished into the night. Lucy closed and locked the door, and then she leaned back against it, breathing out in a long, happy sigh. She crossed her arms around herself, closing her eyes and replaying what had just occurred.

Oddly enough, I’m glad that Aunt Joan forced me to go to Thornbridge Manor.

She gasped, her hands going to her flushed cheeks. Aunt Joan would be home at any moment! Here she was, mooning about! Lucy made her way upstairs, then settled in on the settee with her book. She stared at the open pages, though her eyes did not see the words written there.

Her mind and all of her senses were filled with Silas. She couldn’t stop smiling. She was glad that she had listened to Aunt Joan’s advice. There was so much for her to look forward to—she was going to have a life with the man that she loved. Everything else was just extra.

Chapter 35

Silas returned home in a hansom cab. He was blissfully happy after his visit with Lucy. Even the lights in the rented town home seemed to burn much brighter. There was a light on in the parlour, and he wondered who was home.

Dinah was out, having dinner with Lord Browning and his set. Michael had been planning to be out at the gentlemen's club. But they had left hours ago, even before Silas had gone to meet Levi.

He felt far more intoxicated than he was. When Silas went up to the parlour, his brother was sitting there, drinking some brandy and staring into the fire.

"How has your evening been, Michael?" Silas asked. His own had been excellent. He was buoyed by the turn of events.

"I've spent it here at home, so very quiet. Particularly since both you and Dinah have been out."

"You should have come along," Silas said, surprised to hear it. Michael was rarely one to remain at home in the evening, particularly when the family was in London. "After the play, Levi and I went to The Spotted Dog. You were most welcome to join."

Silas poured himself a brandy from the decanter that sat on the

sideboard and went to sit with his brother. The leather of the armchair creaked under his weight.

“I wasn’t up for it.” Michael raised his glass to his lips.

Silas studied his brother closely. Michael was grim-faced, clearly unhappy.

“When did Lady Arabella end things?” he asked, feeling horrible for not even noticing.

“About a week after father’s funeral,” he replied. “Apparently, she believed that you would defer the viscountcy to me.”

“I also believed that would happen,” Silas mused. “I thought I could persuade Father to give the title to you, so then I wouldn’t have to change my ways.”

Michael laughed bitterly. “That was never going to happen,” he said. “You were always going to have to learn that.”

“I’ve learned it the hard way,” he commented. “But I want to know what can I do to help you? You do so much for the estate and our businesses. Surely, there’s something?”

Michael stared at the fire. “I want to become independent,” he replied. “I want to buy myself a house,” he went on. “So that I can marry, and we can be happy. A woman wants to be mistress of her own home. In

that, at least, Lady Arabella was right."

"Done," Silas agreed, thinking of the extra land that his father had bought prior to his death. It would make an excellent place to build a house. "There's plenty of room near Thornbridge Manor. We can divide it up and give you a place that's all your own."

Michael looked him in the eye. "Do you really mean that?"

"I really mean it," Silas assured him. "You do so much for the estate, and the running of the businesses. Merely because you're the second son, you get almost none of it but your twenty thousand a year." It was a considerable sum, but Silas could see why Michael wanted a home. It made perfect sense.

"Thank you, Silas. You have no idea what this means." Michael was looking at him as though he were a drowning man who had just been rescued.

"Of course," Silas replied. "It's not fair that I should get everything, and you get only enough to cover your living expenses."

"It's how the world is." Michael shrugged.

"It shouldn't be. The estate should be divided up equally between the three of us," Silas mused. "And the title should go to the one who deserves it, not the oldest."

“You’re the one who deserves it,” Michael told him. “I really mean that. You’re proving every day that Father’s trust in you was right. You’re really turning out to be a kind and fair gentleman.”

Silas smiled at him, then raised his glass. It was good to hear Michael say that. “I still think it should have gone to you.”

“I disagree.”

The two brothers sat, sipping their drinks and staring into the fire. Silas was glad he’d had this talk with his brother. After all, Dinah was going to be married. And Silas would too, judging by how well things were going with Lucy. Which meant that Michael would need to find his happily ever after, as well.

And Silas meant to help him find it.

Chapter 36

Lucy and Silas were walking in the park with Aunt Joan and two of her friends walking behind them, as their chaperones. They had begun to do this regularly. Silas claimed that he couldn't bear to go more than a day without seeing her.

It was a sunny day, and the sky overhead was as blue as Silas's eyes. Their breath fogged in the brisk air. Lucy held her cloak to herself tightly, to ward off the chill.

Her gloved hand rested in the crook of his elbow. She glanced over at him. He had been quiet, lost in his thoughts. Usually, he kept up a steady stream of discussion.

"You seem thoughtful," she commented. It wasn't often that he was silent. Silas was very talkative.

"My brother was supposed to become engaged," he told her. "I found out that it fell through, only a short time after my father's funeral. He didn't tell me. Not until recently."

"Oh! How awful." No wonder Michael had seemed glum the past few times that she had seen him. Of the Sweet siblings, Michael was the one that she knew the least. "I thought he was angry with me, but I couldn't figure out why." This explained it. After his own engagement had ended, to see both of his siblings happily engaged was like having salt rubbed in a particularly brutal wound.

“No. No one could ever be angry with you,” he said with feeling.

“It’s happened before.” She recalled several times, where she had been ousted from discussions for having opinions that others did not like. It was a common happenstance, in her case.

“Hardly.” He sighed. “I want to do something for him. I want to be able to build him a house, on Thornbridge estate or nearby.”

“That would be a kind thing to do.” Lucy knew that the Sweet siblings were all very close. Having his brother start his family so near to Thornbridge would be a good solution, in her opinion.

“I want to help him,” he said. “He does so much for me.”

“Then you certainly should.” Lucy wondered why he seemed to be asking her permission to help his brother. “He’s your brother, your family. You need to do right by him.”

“You’re so wise,” he commented, smiling at her.

“The world is not a fair place,” Lucy said. This was true, in her experience. “It sounds like you’re trying your best to ensure your brother is taken care of.”

Mr Stalton was walking along the road, and Lucy’s heart began to

pound. She glanced over at Silas, who looked furious. Mr Stalton smiled at them, his eyes filled with a cruel gleam. Lucy was surprised when Silas pointedly ignored him, marching past.

When they were a good distance away, she peered at him. “Why did you ignore Mr Stalton? Is he not your friend?”

“He’s no longer a friend to me,” Silas growled. “He has acted most shamefully. If I were you, I would avoid him at all costs.”

“After he cornered me in the maze at Thornbridge Manor, I was already doing so.” She shuddered to recall how he’d reached out to her.

“He mistreats women,” Silas said. “I cannot call someone like that a friend.”

Lucy could tell that something had happened between them, though Silas didn’t want to say what. So, they walked on in silence. Lucy cleared her throat.

“Well, I for one could use a cup of tea,” Lucy said, trying to bring levity to the day. She was relieved that she wouldn’t have to be polite to Mr Stalton. She wouldn’t have to see him at all, it seemed. For that, she was glad.

“Then let us return to Harley Street,” Silas said, smiling.

Lucy beamed up at Silas. Mr Stalton was merely a brief cloud, which she soon forgot about. She was brilliantly happy. Lucy was falling more and more in love with Silas every day.

With Aunt Joan's excited talk of weddings and such, Lucy was beginning to think about that day. She wanted a spring wedding. That would give her enough time to enjoy her life with Aunt Joan for a little while longer.

She had never thought that any of this would be possible. And yet, here she was. Lucy Wilds, in love. The whole world felt a little bit brighter, and she was blissfully happy. It seemed that nothing at all could go wrong.

Chapter 37

It was a Monday morning. Lucy went to the parlour right after breakfast had been cleared away and she put on her smock, buttoning it over her dress. Aunt Joan came to the parlour door just as she was opening a tube of Prussian blue oil paint.

“I’m going to visit Mrs. Trent,” Aunt Joan announced. She had her bonnet and Spencer jacket on and held her gloves in one hand. As was her wont, Aunt Joan was dressed in black. She had been ever since Lucy’s parents had passed.

“I’ll be here, working on my painting,” Lucy replied. She had that rush that came with starting a new piece.

“Very good,” Aunt Joan told her, waving goodbye. It was as things usually went. Aunt Joan had a very lively social life. She was usually out visiting someone, or she was in, receiving visitors or writing to her friends who had married and moved away.

Lucy began to work, mixing Prussian blue and Cadmium yellow to make green. She added a little red to darken it.

Aunt Joan was universally liked. Her vast network of friends, near and far, brought her much joy. Lucy was glad that she had such friends. She felt awful now that she knew that her aunt regretted never marrying. Aunt Joan wasn’t the sort to sit around and be bitter. It wasn’t in her nature.

Lucy looked at her painting. It was full of dark shadows and bright swathes of light. She had never painted with such passion and fervour before. But she had something in her mind, and she couldn't rest—not until she had put it down on canvas.

She began to work, mixing a bright blue for the sky, which peeked through the branches of the forest. She lost herself in her work, her mind building the world of her painting. Lucy's imagination was vast. She allowed herself to get lost in the fairytale forest.

She could feel the coolness of the shade, the warmth of the sun cutting through the leaves of the trees. She could almost smell the scent of the woods—the dirt and the foliage. If she tried, she could hear the sound of her feet padding over the paths, the sound of the leaves as they rustled in a slight breeze over her head.

She wasn't alone. Silas was there, in the woods with her. She was dressed in a white gown, with flowers in her hair… poppies and lilacs. She could smell their sweet scents, feel the silk of their petals.

There was a knocking at the front door, pulling her out of her mind and back into the parlour in London. It jarred her, like a jangling bell. She paused, waiting for the person to give up and go away. But the knocking was insistent. She sighed, realizing that whoever it was, they were not going anywhere.

She put her palette and her brush aside, then she pulled off her smock, leaving it slung over the back of one of the armchairs. When she answered the door, she found Silas standing there.

“I knew you were home,” he said.

“How?”

“I could see you, standing beside the window.” He gestured with his chin in the direction of the parlour window.

“Aunt Joan isn’t home.”

“Has that stopped us before?” He raised his eyebrow and smiled at her. Lucy glanced over, to see that their next-door neighbour, Mr Falstrop, was just stepping out of his front door. Lucy thought quickly.

“Go around the back,” she whispered. He nodded, bowing to her. Loudly, she added. “My aunt isn’t at home today. I will have to see you some other time, Lord Thornbridge.”

“Good day, Miss Wilds,” he announced, bowing to her gallantly. Lucy closed the door, then walked slowly to the back door, which she held open to let him inside.

He came in, pressing his lips to hers as he closed the door behind him. As it always did, his kiss filled her up with light.

“What were you doing?”

“Painting.” She looked down at her hands, which were smudged with paint.

“Let me watch you.”

“I can take a rest.”

“No, I want to see you work.”

It had been a long time since her instructor had watched her paint. Lucy led the way upstairs, to the parlour, feeling self-conscious as she crossed the room to her easel. Lucy put on her smock, buttoning it up again.

She picked up her palette and brush. He stood behind her and she could feel his breath, warm on the back of her neck. Her pulse raced, and butterflies rioted in her stomach. She continued to work, pulling out highlights on the two figures.

“I didn’t know that you painted with such passion,” he murmured softly.

“It’s new.”

“Is it?” The note of curiosity in his voice couldn’t be missed. She smiled to herself.

“It is.”

“I like to think that it’s me, but I think that you were always capable of this.”

“It has been you. Before you, I never knew that such passion existed. I feel more awake and alive than I’ve ever been.” Her pulse was racing, causing her hands to shake.

She turned towards him, setting down her palette and brush. He cupped her cheek in his hand, leaning in to kiss her, his lips warm and soft against hers.

“I also feel awakened,” he whispered, his voice sultry.

“You said that you love me,” she reminded him with a smile.

“So I do.”

She studied him. She could see his love for her gleaming in his eyes. They were such an impossible shade of blue, like the sky.

“I look forward to watching you paint all of the time,” he said. “Once we are married.”

She beamed, blushing. “That’s something I never thought to hear,” she admitted.

“Why did you think that you were going to be a spinster?” he asked, placing a finger underneath her chin. “You seem…”

Lucy sighed, her heart doing a nervous flip. She didn’t want to admit to loving Edward Russ. When she looked into his eyes, however, she felt that she could trust him.

She opened her mouth to say, but that was when Aunt Joan opened the front door downstairs.

“Lucy!” she called out. “I’m home!”

Both of them froze. Their eyes widened. “I’ll get her occupied, down in the kitchen,” Lucy said. “You slip out the back door.”

He nodded, kissing her quickly, one last time. Lucy ran down the hallway to meet her aunt before she came into the parlour.

“Aunt Joan! How was Mrs. Trent?” Lucy asked. When she arrived at the front door, her aunt was untying the bow of her bonnet. She was beaming, clearly having had a very enjoyable time visiting her friend.

“She was very well. She asked about you. I said that you were doing very well,” she said.

“Come!” Lucy said, grabbing Aunt Joan by the arm. “There’s something in the kitchen I have to show you.”

“Really? Is there a mouse?” Aunt Joan asked, giving Lucy the story that she needed. She grabbed onto it with both hands.

“I saw one, sneaking through the larder,” Lucy said, nodding emphatically. “It moved so very quickly!”

“Oh dear. I suppose we should get a cat,” Aunt Joan mused. She opened the door, peering inside. The larder was filled with jars of jam, for the most part, a tin of tea, a single sack of flour, and one of sugar. The two women didn’t eat much, thus their larder was rather sparse.

Lucy could only pray that Silas was silent. She didn’t know how to explain being alone and unaccompanied with him to Aunt Joan. Lucy craved it, however. She ached for him when he wasn’t there. When he had shown up, there had been no way that she would have been able to turn him away.

Silas moved as quietly as he could. He could hear Lucy talking in a raised voice, something about having seen a mouse. He could hear her making noise, clinking dishes to cover the sound of him leaving the house. He smiled to himself. This was just like in a play.

“Mice are such a common thing in the city,” her aunt was saying. “We

should have gotten another cat, after dear Prudence passed. Miss Mulder's cat just had a litter of kittens. I'll have to ask her for one."

"I think that you should," Lucy replied. "Or else we'll be besieged by them. I don't suppose you'll want a cup of tea?" Lucy began moving things around, making a very laudable racket.

Silas opened the back door, slowly. It made a soft creaking noise. The slower he went, the less it protested. His heart was racing in his chest. He slipped through, closing the door with a gentle click.

He knew that Lucy would secretly lock it again. Slipping his hands into his pockets, he walked down the alley between the houses, then melted in with the crowd on the street.

As he walked, he found himself missing his father, immensely. He wished, with all his heart, that things had gone differently. What he would have given, to have one more day with him. One more conversation, in which he could tell his father that he was in love with Lucy. His father would have been pleased. Even though they had disagreed with how Silas had conducted his life and affairs, they had been very close.

But Silas was glad that Lucy was giving him her heart. She was the balm that he had known would assuage his grief. He cherished her, and the moments that they stole together. He could envision their life together, and it was a happy one, something he'd never expected for himself. He imagined returning home to find her working on a painting. He would slip in behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and showering her with kisses.

As he made his way through the streets, his mind was full of nothing

but her. He thought of the painting she was working on. There was passion in her work which rivalled that of most male painters. There was light and colour, shadow and depth.

It's no longer enough to refer to her as "accomplished," he thought. *She's truly gifted.*

He was learning that it was a slight against young ladies not to refer to them as genius. Lucy would be able to focus on her work. She could grow. Silas could support her. He could afford to rent out gallery space for her to display her paintings. He knew gentlemen who were in the art world, and he could introduce her. He considered with pride that his wife would be an artist. He could make everyone take her seriously.

When he walked into the house, Michael met him near the door. He was frowning, as he usually was those days. Silas hoped that, one day, his brother would find happiness again.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Out walking," Silas said, for he didn't want to get Lucy in any trouble.

Michael studied him, clearly not pleased with his answer. "Well, Lord Browning is here."

"What for?"

“We must discuss wedding plans,” Michael replied. “Later, we need to finish the invitations for the party.”

Silas smiled. There was never a dull moment. “Lead on, then.” He was pleased to pay for his sister’s wedding, as well as her dowry. There was money for it.

It was what his father would have wanted. He and Michael entered the room. Dinah’s lady’s maid sat in the corner, chaperoning Dinah and Lord Browning. Silas beamed at them.

Chapter 38

Lucy stepped back to observe her work. It was dark, except for the beam of sunlight emanating through the branches. She wanted something baroque, passionate. It was a diversion from her usual sun-drenched fruits and flowers.

She was pleased with the result—a stunning figural work, with the two lovers in the middle of the forest, surrounded by stunning wildflowers. It made her heart race. She could not deny that it was her and Silas, though she did plan to make changes—make them look less similar. She didn't know where to hang it. Her own bedchamber seemed the most likely space for it.

"Lucy," Aunt Joan called from the doorway. Lucy looked up, jarred from the deep, meditative focus that she'd been in. "Miss Sweet is here!"

Dinah peered inside the room, waving to Lucy. She was dressed in black, still. Though, the colour suited her dark hair and blue eyes, it was not her usual choice of white or pale pink.

"Welcome!" Lucy said, setting her brush aside. She looked down at her hands, which were smudged with paint. She quickly wiped them on the rag that she kept nearby before unbuttoning her smock.

"Can I see what you're working on?" Dinah asked curiously.

“Of course.” Lucy stepped back. The two friends stood, side by side, and considered the work. When Lucy glanced over at her friend, Dinah was smiling at it. Lucy felt herself blush bright crimson.

“The way that they’re looking at each other,” Dinah commented. “Such passion that you evoke.”

“Indeed,” Lucy said.

“Is this how you feel about my brother?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lucy admitted. “Very much so.”

“I hope that someday, I feel that way about Reginald,” Dinah said, dreamily. “I do esteem him, and I know that we’ll make each other happy, but…”

“Perhaps, you will.” Lucy laughed. “Aunt Joan says that it’s too racy except for in the boudoir.”

They both giggled wickedly, their eyes meeting.

“She’s right,” Dinah replied, tilting her head to the side. “Although, I will have a boudoir of my own to decorate in the coming months… is there any way that I might purchase it from you?”

“Oh, Dinah. You are wicked.”

“I mean it.”

“The Marchioness of Browing, with a racy portrait on the wall of her bedchamber?” Lucy raised her eyebrow.

“Of course!” Dinah beamed.

“Then you shall have it as a wedding gift from me,” Lucy assured her. “Now, come. Let’s go over and sit down.”

The two friends settled in for a lazy chat. Dinah was full of wedding plans, and party plans. She was clearly in her element.

“The mourning period will be over soon, so we will be able to throw the party at the house. With the renovations, it looks completely new. My brothers both had a hand in it.”

“I look forward to seeing it,” Lucy said. She was excited about the party—it would be the first time that she and Silas would be at a public function together since they had started courting.

“You’ll absolutely die when you see what’s been done to the ballroom,” Dinah said. “The floor was redone, so that the tiles form a rose in the very centre.”

“That sounds beautiful.” Lucy could picture it, or so she thought. She had never seen such a detailed floor, however, and didn’t have anything to compare it to.

“Indeed. The two of them have spared no expense.”

“Sounds like it.”

“You’ve made Silas the happiest of men,” she said. “I haven’t seen him so happy and confident in years.” She tilted her head. “I do look forward to us being sisters. You’ll do so well as the Viscountess of Thornbridge.”

That brought Lucy up to a halt. “I… I hadn’t thought of that,” she mused, panicking.

“Of course, you’ll do admirably,” Dinah said, clearly a lot more confident in Lucy’s abilities as a hostess than she should have been.

Dinah stayed for a while more. Lucy kept up with the conversation, but inside, she was in a massive panic. She couldn’t imagine being Lady Thornbridge, but should she marry Silas, that was exactly who she would be.

The thought terrified her.

Chapter 39

It was midmorning when Lucy answered the knock on the door. They weren't expecting anyone, so she divined that it must be the post. A footman in neat livery stood there. He handed her a letter.

"Special delivery from the Viscount of Thornbridge," he said.

"Thank you," she replied, wondering what it could be. Silas hadn't mentioned anything when he'd called the day before. Though, when she opened it, she found that it was the invitation to the party, come at last.

"What is it?" Aunt Joan asked. Lucy held the letter out to her.

"An invitation to the party at their newly-renovated townhouse," she explained. "They plan to have the renovations completed soon."

Aunt Joan accepted it, her eyes travelling over the invitation. "How exciting!" she gushed. "We will have to get you a new gown."

"Why, Aunt Joan?" She had planned to wear her blue and white striped muslin. After all, why spend money when she wasn't sure she was going to marry Silas, after all? She didn't believe that she was going to be able to magically turn herself into the viscountess. Why pretend to be a queen when you were a nothing more than a maid in rags?

“Lucy,” her aunt said. “You are the intended of the viscount. You have to look the part!” She gasped, beaming. “You’re going to be Mistress of Thornbridge Manor.”

Lucy felt herself grow pale. She knew nothing of running a large household. She smiled, though inside, she was beginning to feel overwhelmed. Her tiny, happy life with Aunt Joan was going to come to an end. And then, Lucy was going to have a life of struggle, trying to become someone who she clearly was not. Aunt Joan walked quickly down the hall, leaving a stream of excited chatter in her wake.

She was, in her heart, a quiet and reserved person, who was used to her quiet, introspective life. It was going to all come shattering down around her. The ton would talk and they would find her utterly wanting. A complete disappointment! Silas would be so let down.

Lucy steadied herself. She had agreed to it already. She and Silas, while they were not yet engaged, seemed to have an understanding that one was forthcoming. Just as soon as the six-month mourning period for his father was over, he would likely ask her.

She was going to have to face her new life with some measure of bravery and resolve—which was easy enough to say but difficult to conjure up, particularly where neither existed.

Should I say no? she wondered. *He’ll be disappointed, for certain, but… maybe it would be for the best.*

When she made her way to the parlour, she found that Aunt Joan was

dressed to go out.

"Where's your bonnet?" she asked.

"I—I haven't gotten it yet." She swallowed. There was a painful lump in the back of her throat. Tears prickled her eyes, threatening to overflow.

Her aunt studied her closely. "What's the matter? Don't think that I haven't noticed how much quieter you've been all of a sudden."

Aunt Joan had always noticed when she was upset. Lucy couldn't hide it from her. She exhaled, then sat down on the settee. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"Aunt Joan," she began, then paused, swallowing back the painful lump. Her aunt sat down on one of the armchairs, taking her hand and pressing it gently.

"Tell me, dear."

"How am I supposed to become the Viscountess of Thornbridge?" she asked. She couldn't believe how short-sighted she had been. "I couldn't even stand being a guest in the countryside for a weekend. How am I supposed to be the hostess? How am *I* supposed to throw balls? Me, Lucy Wilds, an orphan and a societal hermit? Silas claims that I'll have help, and that we can take it slowly, but… what if I am never able rise to the occasion?"

Aunt Joan smiled. “I know that it’s not your expertise,” she said tactfully. “But I’m sure that you will be able to rise to the occasion.”

“What if I can’t do it?” Lucy insisted.

“You know that you’re going to have help,” Aunt Joan reminded her. “I’ll be there, and Dinah. Miss Sweet knows what she’s doing, and I also have some knowledge of these matters, unmarried as I am.”

Lucy’s tears were hot on her cheeks as they began to fall. “I’m not the sort to be a fine lady and to run a household. I’m going to feel like an imposter. And the worst thing is, everyone will know it.”

“Oh, Lucy!” Aunt Joan gasped, reaching out to take her hand.

“I just… I wasn’t thinking when I accepted Silas’ request to court me. When I met him, he was not a viscount, but now… he is, and that means something,” she sobbed.

“But you learn,” Aunt Joan said. “You can learn. You are the most intelligent and witty woman of my whole acquaintance. If anyone can become a fine lady, it’s you.”

Lucy looked into her aunt’s eyes. Tears were falling freely down her cheeks. She was devastated that she was going to have to turn down Silas’ offer of marriage. She felt as though her heart were breaking. “I’m going to have to end it, aren’t I? I cannot marry him.”

“Let me ask you something,” Aunt Joan said, waiting until Lucy nodded her acquiescence. “If you did marry Lord Thornbridge, then would you be marrying him because you want to make someone else happy, or are you marrying him because he makes you happy?”

Lucy swallowed and sniffled as she considered it. She thought of the way her heart beat faster whenever he was near. She thought of the way that butterflies awoke in her stomach when she thought of him.

“No,” she said softly. “I’m marrying him because he makes me happy.”

“Then anything that comes your way, you can figure out together,” Aunt Joan told her. “I may not have ever married myself, but I know that much is true. A marriage is a partnership. You work together to solve your problems.”

Lucy sniffled, sighing. She felt much better. She wiped her cheek with one hand, keeping hold of her aunt’s hand with the other. Lucy nodded.

“You’re right,” she said, at last.

“You’re doing this for the right reasons, and I am so glad that you’re marrying for love. Your parents, and his parents as well, would have been so happy to know of this.” Aunt Joan was smiling at her in an encouraging manner.

Lucy smiled at the thought of all of those that they had lost, and how pleased they would be over Lucy and Silas’ union. But she still had her

doubts. “I just don’t know if I could do it,” she admitted.

“Then you must talk to Silas.” Aunt Joan nodded.

Lucy nodded back, accepting the handkerchief that her aunt handed to her. She wiped at her eyes.

She would have to tell him the truth. She owed it to him. Then, it would be up to him—if Silas didn’t think that she could do it, then Lucy would be broken-hearted, but she would understand.

Chapter 40

Silas went to dine at the Miss Wildses. As they ate, Miss Joan Wilds kept up the conversation. Lucy was very quiet. She seemed downcast, and he wondered what the matter could be. He knew it couldn't be the supper. It was a very fine chicken, roasted with root vegetables. A simple meal, but a delicious one.

"How are the renovations to your home going, Lord Thornbridge?" Miss Wilds asked him.

"Very well," he said. "They are almost complete. Since we had the time and the money, my brother and I decided to update the entirety of the house."

"What a good idea."

"Indeed. We are often in London, so it was a reasonable expense. It hasn't been updated since my father's childhood."

"I know that Amelia was the one to redo the wallpaper, back when she was a young bride. I remember that she was so nervous about the cost!"

"Indeed," he agreed. "My mother's tastes were very expensive. However, my father wouldn't have denied her for the world." His father's love for his mother had known no bounds.

“Oh, indeed,” Miss Wilds agreed.

Silas glanced at Lucy, whose eyes were on her plate. She was studiously avoiding his gaze, and he wondered what was the matter. She was often quiet, but rarely this quiet.

When her aunt ran to go and fetch the dessert, he placed his fingers beneath her chin, raising her face until her eyes met his.

“What’s the matter, my love?” he asked.

“I’m nervous.”

“What for?”

“I… I only just realized that I’m to be Lady Thornbridge,” she admitted mournfully.

“What’s wrong with that?” His heart beat nervously in his chest—had she changed her mind? Was she telling him that she no longer wanted to be with him? His whole life hung in the balance.

“If I can barely stand to be in company as a guest, then how am I supposed to throw balls and fancy parties?” she pointed out.

“That is a serious concern,” he said, wondering how to remedy it. He knew, immediately. “We can get you used to it, slowly. Dinah will be there to introduce you into Society. And, you know, we don’t have to always throw balls and fancy parties, if you don’t want to.”

“But you *do* have to,” she pointed out, tears forming in her eyes.

He leaned in, pressing his lips to hers. When he pulled away, he wiped away her tears with his thumbs.

“I didn’t know that it was possible to love you even more than I already do,” he said, smiling at her.

“Why?” She was searching his face. Clearly, she had expected something else. She had expected him to give her up!

“If you were overjoyed, then you wouldn’t have been true to yourself,” he said. “Being a Lady requires finding a way that you can make it your own. It’s up to you how you want it to be done….” He trailed off. “And, worst case, you can be like Lady Duncan, who is a hermit and never throws any parties at all.”

He took her by the hand. “I’ll let Dinah know,” he said. “She’ll introduce you to her set. I think you’ll like them. They’re very much like you.”

She shot him a suspicious look. “What do you mean?”

“Dinah told me all about that painting.” He flashed her a wicked grin, and she laughed. “I need to see it, now that you’ve almost finished.” His voice came out in a lustful growl. How he wanted desperately to be alone with her, with no chance of anyone coming upon them.

“So you shall,” she promised, a small smile coming to her lips.

“Now, no panicking,” he said, his eyes on her lips. “We will figure everything out. Together.”

“Together,” she agreed. Silas felt relieved that they had had this discussion. They should have had it much sooner, though it had never occurred to him. He would speak with Dinah the moment he returned home.

“Do you love me?” he asked.

“You know that I do.”

“Then there will be no problems,” he declared. For how could there be any problems at all if Miss Lucy Wilds was in love with him? He had never before been in love. It felt like the whole world was opening at his feet. He had only to step forward, and it would belong to him.

Chapter 41

“Come, Lucy. We must go to the dressmaker’s,” Aunt Joan announced. It was a week until the party. Lucy had just begun to set out her paints so she could get to work.

“I’ll just wear my green muslin,” she said. After all, Silas had said that she needed to learn how to arrange things for herself. She needed to be confident, and part of that came from being comfortable.

“I want to buy you this new dress,” Aunt Joan insisted. “You must look the part of the future viscountess. Then, perhaps, you’ll start to feel the part. You need to learn how to make the game play by your rules. You’re going to be a lady, which means that you’ll have the power to.”

“Thank you, Aunt Joan.” Lucy held her aunt’s hand. “That is, truly masterful advice.”

“Come. Step one is making you look like a lady. Step two, is you believing it.” Aunt Joan nodded to herself.

Lucy, after her talk with Silas at dinner the other night, was feeling much more confident about stepping into the shoes of viscountess. It was going to be an adjustment, but she would be surrounded by people who loved and supported her, no matter what she wanted to do and how she wanted to accomplish it.

She loved Silas, with all her heart. Whatever other arrangements had to be made so that they were both happy would be made, as necessary. Aunt Joan was smiling at her expectantly.

"Very well," Lucy said. "Though the funds for it shall come out of my money." She didn't want her aunt to spend her meagre funds. Aunt Joan already did too much. She would need them, after Lucy got married.

They went to the dress shop, where Lucy was measured and then shown beautiful bolts of cloth. She and Aunt Joan chose a spectacular yellow silk for Lucy to wear to the party. She was reminded of the dress that Lady Baldwin had worn the previous summer. Lucy had admired it. Now, she would have one of her own.

Afterward, Lucy did feel better. She was going to have to adjust—to make the game play by her rules. She was certainly more excited about the party.

Chapter 42

It had taken months, yet here Silas was, standing in the newly renovated house. It smelled of fresh paint and new carpeting, but it was still home. He and Michael had decided to spare no expense. The house would be used by the whole family, for many years to come. An update to a more modern style was necessary.

It was good to be back in their own home—in his own bed. Silas had been pleased that the staff had been able to rescue his soft red velvet duvet with a thorough washing.

His valet was helping him to dress for the party, in his dark blue frock coat, his cream-coloured breeches, and tall black boots. He studied his reflection in the mirror, adjusting the collar of his jacket.

Michael came to the door. “Are you ready, Silas?”

“I am,” he said, waiting for the valet to finish running the brush over his shoulders.

He turned toward his brother, who was dressed similarly. He and Michael had come to an agreement, of sorts. Michael had agreed to stop doubting Silas’ affections toward Lucy.

Silas missed her—over the past week, he had become wrapped up in their removal from the rented home, and back into the townhouse.

He'd had to arrange for the workmen to be paid and the party to be planned. The servants had all needed their orders, and the decorations had had to be gone over. Luckily, Dinah had largely taken over the planning thereof. She certainly had an eye for it.

When he had a spare moment, Silas had sent Lucy letters. She had answered them. Although, it wasn't the same as having her there with him. He missed her, and he was looking forward to seeing her this evening.

"And you're all right with Percy coming?" Michael asked. "I'll be sure to keep an eye on him, to make sure that the ladies are safe."

Michael had helped Percy to get a job at one of the businesses that the Viscountcy of Thornbridge financed. The two brothers had kept tabs on him, and so far, the reports were favourable. Percy was a model worker, and he had begun to pay back his debts.

Michael had even been able to convince Silas to allow Percy to come to the party. Silas was in a good mood. The agreement was that Percy not speak to either Silas or, heaven forbid, Lucy.

"Why not?" Silas mused. "If he's working an honest job, and our sister is not even a little bit in danger, then I can forgive him for the moment."

It would be the first engagement for the Sweets since the death of their father. It would be a small get-together, since they were still in their mourning period. Nothing extravagant—just an intimate housewarming.

“The musicians have arrived,” Michael informed him. “I had them set up in the corner of the ballroom.”

“Very good.”

The three Sweet siblings met in the foyer. Dinah was dressed in a simple blue silk gown and wore the Sweet family’s diamond necklace, which glittered at her throat. She was always smiling these days. With her marriage to Reginald right around the corner, she was just about to start her life. Silas was happy for her.

Just as he, too, would be starting his life with Lucy, as soon as he was able to ask her. He wanted to be sure that she was comfortable with the idea of becoming viscountess. He knew better than to push her into something before she was ready. He loved her and wanted to be sure she was happy.

Their guests began to arrive, and the three of them greeted the parade of friends. Silas’ cheeks hurt from smiling so much. The house slowly began to fill up with friends and relatives, many of whom he hadn’t seen since the funeral.

Silas saw Lucy the moment that she walked up the steps and his heart felt so full that he feared it might burst. She was dressed in a lemon-yellow silk gown and wore a pair of cream-coloured kid gloves.

Her brown hair was arranged in curls, framing her cheeks, the rest of it pulled back in a low, elegant chignon. He beamed when he saw her, a warm, bright feeling blooming inside of him. She had on a plain grey cloak to keep her warm, which she handed to Mr Morton to hang up.

“Miss Wilds,” he said, taking her hand, then bowing. She curtsied delicately. “You look stunning.” He was proud to say that he was courting her. The neckline of the dress was cut low, baring the pale swell of her breasts. His eyes were drawn to it immediately.

“Thank you, My Lord,” she murmured, her eyes catching the aim of his gaze. The grin that she shot him was pointed. She turned to Miss Joan Wilds, who stood behind her. “My aunt and I are most grateful for the invitation.”

He turned his gaze to the aunt, beaming at her. “Miss Wilds. So good to see you.” It truly was—he was so pleased to have them both here. He hoped that Lucy liked the changes he had made to the house—he had done them with her in mind.

“Thank you, Lord Thornbridge. It’s good to see all of you,” Miss Joan Wilds was then gasping over Dinah’s blue gown, which afforded Silas a moment to speak with Lucy.

“I hope that you’ll save the first dance for me,” he murmured to her.

“Of course, I will,” she said, then she and her aunt moved the rest of the way inside. Silas’ attention was then called away by Lord Browning, who had just arrived at the door.

Silas grinned. He felt like he was floating, his mind on the myriad ways in which he and Lucy could sneak off for a private moment.

Chapter 43

Lucy was excited to be at the party. She had been looking forward to it all week, especially since she and Aunt Joan had gone for her final fitting of her new dress. She certainly did feel like a future viscountess in it.

The lush yellow silk swished around her hips, ballooning out around her legs as she walked. At the empire waist, the dressmaker had added a black ribbon, which pulled the entire look together in an elegant manner. The sleeves were bell-shaped and the neckline was low, baring her décolletage. She had caught Silas looking at the low cut of it, which only made her feel even more confident.

Aunt Joan was deep in conversation with Lady Baldwin, whom she had met at the summer party in the country. They had not seen each other since, and were now catching up after months of being apart. Most of the nobility remained in the countryside for the summer. It was now November, and the ton was beginning to trickle into London in time for the Season.

Dinah was walking towards Lucy, and the two of them met halfway across the room. Dinah took Lucy's hands in her own. Around her neck was a stunning diamond necklace, which looked absolutely elegant on her.

"Come," she said. "I want to introduce you to my friends." She offered Lucy her arm, and they both laughed. They walked around the room, arm in arm. "Silas told me all about your fears," she confided in a low voice. "I am here to dispel all of them." They soon approached two young ladies, about their age.

“These are my friends from school,” Dinah explained. “This is Lady Violet Potsmore, and Lady Rosemary Dunne.” The two were dressed in pink and purple silk gowns.

“This is Miss Lucy Wilds,” Dinah said. “She’s being courted by my elder brother, Silas.”

“So,” Lady Violet said, raising an eyebrow. She and Lady Rosemary shared a smile. Lady Violet looked at Lucy as though she were suddenly very interesting. “You’re the one who’s caught the eye of the handsome Lord Thornbridge?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“We were saying that you must be a very interesting sort of woman to catch his eye.”

“Lucy is!” Dinah exclaimed. “She’s one of the most intelligent and witty women I’ve ever met.”

Lucy blushed. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“That’s because you’re too modest,” Dinah replied. “She’s in love with *Robinson Crusoe*, as well as being one of the finest painters I’ve ever seen.”

“Another reader!” Lady Violet gasped. Both ladies were looking at her with kind interest. Lucy found that she was not shunned—instead, this seemed to be her tribe.

“You must join our club,” Lady Rosemary insisted.

“Oh?” Lucy raised an eyebrow. She had never been a member of a club before. She wondered what sort of meetings they had.

“We sip tea and eat cakes and discuss what we’ve read,” she explained.

Lucy looked at Dinah. “Why have you not introduced us before?”

They all laughed. “Because they weren’t in town, silly. Now that they’re here, though, we can all be best friends.”

Lucy’s smile was enormous, she knew. She hadn’t expected to find anyone there with whom she got along so well. Yet, here they were. They were interested in books and painting and ideas. And they were all ladies.

As they talked, Lucy could begin to see that there was a place for her, among the ton. She just hadn’t known that it existed. She knew that Susan would have to meet all of them. Though the daughter of a solicitor, she was just as interested in books and ideas as the rest of them.

“And what are you ladies all talking about?” Silas asked, coming over to stand beside Lucy. He gave her a look that was meant entirely for her. Lucy’s pulse raced, and she knew that she was blushing.

“She’s one of us now, Silas, so you’ll have to treat her well or you’ll have us to consider,” Lady Rosemary warned.

“I’m sure Lucy is quite fierce when provoked, so I wouldn’t dare,” Silas said, smiling at her with pride as he reached for her hand.

“That’s for certain,” Dinah replied.

“Let me borrow her?” Silas asked his sister.

“Yes, but do bring her back,” Dinah said archly.

“By the by, sister—Reginald is looking for you,” Silas told her. Dinah turned, then Silas placed Lucy’s hand on his arm. “How are you enjoying the party?” he asked her in a low voice.

“Well enough,” she said.

“Good. It’s my first time hosting as viscount,” he murmured. “So I hope that it goes well.”

“You’re doing just fine.” She had been watching him as he made his way around the room. It seemed to come naturally to him—like a duck, taking to water or air.

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Are you nervous, still?” His eyes searched hers. She knew he was referring to their previous conversation.

“Horribly.”

“You hide it well.”

“I was crying to my aunt just last week.”

“You were?”

“I am not often in company,” she explained. “I am used to spending my days painting in the parlour.”

“If you wish, you may do just that,” he said.

“You don’t want me to throw balls and such?”

“Only if you want to, darling,” he told her. “I want you to be happy.”

She smiled, blushing as she looked at him. She felt her chest fill with pride. He was hers. And he wanted her to be happy.

“I’m sure we can find a balance,” she said, offering to meet him halfway, just as he was offering to allow her to remain locked away in the parlour, painting.

“We will. I promise.” He leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Meet me out in the hallway. In two minutes.” In an even louder voice, he said, “Excuse me for a moment.”

She smiled as she beheld the desire in his eyes. He raised an eyebrow in question, and she nodded. They both parted ways. Lucy went one way, and he went the other. By this time, both Lady Violet and Lady Rosemary had made their way to the refreshment table.

Lucy lingered by the table, pretending to look at the food. It was laden with a vast array of finger sandwiches and tiny cakes. There was a crystal bowl filled with punch, as well as champagne served in flutes. The only other time that she had seen such a spread was at Thornbridge Manor. Clearly, the Sweet family was determined to impress and please.

She then pretended that she was warm, waving her fan in front of her face as she proceeded to the door into the hall. It was darkened out there, though there were candelabras located every few paces to light

the way for any guests who needed to step out of the party for some air.

She began to meander, wondering when Silas would come. The door opened and he exited, looking one way, then turning to find her. He beamed, holding out his hand. She took it and allowed herself to be led down the hall.

They reached an alcove, and he pressed her into it. His lips found hers.

“Finally, I have you to myself,” he said, his lips against her ear, his breath warm on her skin.

“You always do.” She was smiling, her pulse quickening.

“No, I don’t,” he argued, his fingers underneath her chin. “Not as often as I would like. But someday, I will.” His eyes seemed to make her a promise.

Lucy’s heart raced at the implication of marriage. He had always been so open about what he wanted, and she found that she was excited by the prospect. He kissed her again. The kiss went all of the way down to her toes.

Chapter 44

Silas and Lucy finally returned to the party, but not before he'd kissed her soundly, then extracted promises from her that she would find him again soon. He loved it when he had the taste of her skin on his lips. It was as intoxicating as any wine.

He stopped by the refreshments table to get himself a glass of champagne. Then, he looked out at the room. It was crowded, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. Percy was there, watching Silas with an unreadable expression on his face. Anger swept through Silas. Though he had agreed to allow Percy there, Silas didn't want him there.

He strode across the room.

"Percy."

"Your brother invited me."

"I know," Silas said coolly. "I said that you could come."

Silas glared at Michael, who stood nearby. He regretted agreeing to it.

"He's a friend of the family," Michael reminded him. "I figured the

two of you could come to terms. Percy did say how sorry he was."

Silas suddenly saw how Michael had engineered this, likely on Percy's behalf. Silas, feeling generous, had forgotten just how angry he was for all of Percy's past transgressions.

"I am, truly sorry," Percy said, though Silas didn't believe it for a moment. "I have seen the error of my ways, and I am endeavouring to do much better these days."

"I'm glad to hear it," Silas stated. "I'll believe it when I see a change."

"Silas," Percy said, his voice as slimy as a puddle.

"Lord Thornbridge to you." Silas knew he was pulling rank. It was a low blow, but one that he felt entirely necessary.

"My Lord," Percy amended. "I was desperate. My father has cut me off from the family funds. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't thinking clearly. No harm was meant to Miss Sweet by it."

Silas merely stared at him, his eye twitching as he tried to keep himself from losing his temper in front of all of his guests.

"Please forgive me," Percy begged, though he didn't seem at all chastened.

“I cannot do so,” Silas stated flatly. “If I see you attempting to get any ladies on their own this evening, I will be sure to make it so that you are never among our company again.” He glanced at Michael. “No matter how charitable my brother is feeling for you.”

His speech ended, he took a glass of champagne from one of the footmen and then strode away. He would have a quick drink, and then he would need to collect Lucy, to begin the dancing.

Chapter 45

The evening had been a wonderful, bright array of dancing and talking. Lucy knew she was glowing. It had been the perfect party. She had divided her time between Dinah and Lady Violet and Lady Rosemary, and then dancing with Silas. She felt as though she were floating on a positively dreamy cloud, far above London, and that she was never going to return to the ground again.

She was in his arms, dancing slowly. Their eyes remained locked as he led her through the steps of the waltz, his hand on the small of her back, holding her close to him.

As the final dance ended, he leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Meet me in the foyer, before you and your aunt leave.”

“Of course.”

The music ended, and they parted ways as everyone left the dance floor. She paused to get a quick drink at the refreshments table before going to find Aunt Joan, who was talking.

“Are you ready to go home?” she asked.

“Oh, yes! Did you have a wonderful evening?” Aunt Joan was beaming.

“I did.”

They both walked out, following the long line of guests who were collecting their cloaks and jackets from the butler by the door.

Aunt Joan bid Silas farewell, then went to collect her and Lucy’s coats. Silas and Lucy were left alone, a short distance from the crowd by the door.

They grinned at each other.

“You truly look beautiful,” he said, bringing her hand to his lips and brushing them against her knuckles. She could feel his touch, even through her soft, lightweight gloves.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “It was a wonderful evening.”

“There you are,” came a familiar voice from behind Lucy. She froze, looking to Silas in confusion. He was glowering at Mr Stalton. Slowly, she turned towards him. She felt sick. There was a nasty gleam in his eyes, and he was smirking.

“So,” he said, “you followed through, after all.”

“What does that mean?” Lucy wondered aloud, turning toward Silas for an explanation. His face darkened.

“I think it’s time that you left, Percy.”

“You cannot order me about, My Lord,” Percy said, offended. “Just because you’re a viscount now does not mean that you can go back on a bet that you lost.”

Percy staggered off, clearly having partaken profusely of the punch. He made his way back into the ballroom, where some of the guests were still gathered, talking.

“What was he talking about?” Lucy asked, a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“Drunken babble, most likely,” Silas told her dismissively. “Come. I will hire a hansom cab to take you and your aunt home safely.”

“That’s very kind of you.” She wondered what Mr Stalton could have meant. She had seen Silas’ reaction, and it had been clear that he’d known exactly what Mr Stalton had spoken of—and had been displeased by it. She shook it off. It was the end of a wonderful evening—the best in all of her memory. She decided not to allow Mr Stalton ruin it.

Chapter 46

It was late at night by the time the last of the guests had left. Silas, Levi, and Michael sat in the parlour, sipping glasses of brandy. Dinah had retired to her bedchamber an hour previous. Silas was feeling fuzzy around the edges—a combination of tiredness and the alcohol.

“I cannot have Percy here as a guest,” Silas said to Michael. “He’s no longer welcome here.”

“Did he do something?” Michael asked curiously.

“He tried to insinuate that I was courting Lucy as a part of that stupid bet!”

“You should be honest with her,” Michael advised. “That your pursuit of her was initially born from a bet.”

“That is unwise, on all counts,” Levi warned, shaking his head. “At this point, so far in and as close as you are to asking her for her hand in marriage, she would only hate you for what you’ve done.”

Silas sighed, staring at the contents of his glass. “I don’t know what to do,” he admitted. “All I know is that I love Lucy, and I want to be with her forever.”

“I’m sorry that I brought him here this evening,” Michael said. “I truly thought him reformed. Clearly, he has not. Did you see how he staggered out of here?” He shook his head and sighed.

“Once he starts drinking, any reform that he might have affected goes right out the window,” Levi said. “I think he wanted for you to think he was reformed, so he could come to the party.”

“Quite right,” Michael agreed sadly.

They all sat in silence for a long moment, getting lost in their own thoughts. Silas knew he needed to be honest with Lucy. But at what cost? She would be angry with him, certainly. Could she find it within herself to forgive him?

Perhaps, I won’t ever have to tell her.

If he kept Percy away from her, then she need never know. It would be his own dark secret. He could pretend that it had never happened. He loved her, and he felt sick at the thought of upsetting her.

“Lady Rosemary Dunne looked very pretty tonight,” Michael noted.

Silas grinned. “I saw that you danced with her.”

“Three times.” Michael was beaming, his eyes far away.

Clearly, Silas wasn't the only one to have had an enjoyable evening. Though Michael had known Rosemary for years, it seemed that one night had changed everything. Silas looked over at Levi, grinning.

"Have you met Lady Violet Potsmore, my friend?"

"I say, old chap," Levi replied, pausing to take a sip. "Now that you're practically engaged, you're trying to set everyone up."

"I just want you to be happy," Silas said.

Levi laughed, throwing his head back. "My friend, I don't think Lady Violet Potsmore is interested in me." He mournfully looked into his cup. Finding it empty, he stood up to refill it.

"We'll see about that," Michael mumbled to Silas. "I saw how she looked at him."

Silas smiled. Then, it had been a very good evening, all around. He had the hunch that it would take Levi and Violet a very long while, but someday, they would both realize that they cared for each other. The spark was there. The fire just needed to be lit.

Chapter 47

It had been several days since the party and Lucy had spent them quietly at home, working on her painting of the two lovers in the woods. It was almost nearing completion. She wanted to have it done before Dinah's marriage, so she could present it to her friend as a gift.

Lucy was not surprised when Dinah called on the third day. They had agreed to go for a walk in the park to discuss the party at length. Having waited a few days, Lucy was eager to recall all of the wonderful things that had happened that night. Aunt Joan came along with them, and the three women set out on a stroll of the park that was near to the house on Harley Street.

It was a cool day, with their breaths fogging on the air as they talked. The leaves were beginning to fall from the trees in a bright profusion of reds, oranges, and golds. The grass was lush and bright green, and the park was crowded with people enjoying one of the last autumn days before winter set in, keeping them indoors.

"I spent the whole of the evening talking," Aunt Joan was saying. "Though I did see that both of you danced every set!"

"We did," Dinah agreed, with a smile directed at Lucy. "There was no want for gentlemen that evening to dance with. My brother didn't think to invite enough ladies so that there were an equal number of pairs for all of the dances. I told him that it was a serious concern, but alas, he doesn't listen to me."

“Well, I suppose we have to forgive him,” Lucy pointed out. “It was the first party that he’d ever planned.”

“This is true,” Dinah allowed. “However, I believe that you’re biased when it comes to my brother, Lucy.” She grinned at her.

“Oh, she is,” Aunt Joan agreed. They all laughed. Lucy knew that she was blushing a deep crimson. She glanced away from them, and when she did, she spotted Mr Stalton. He was dressed in deep burgundy, with an awful orange top hat. He smiled at them, though it didn’t reach his eyes, which were like cold flint.

She shuddered, as she recalled his slimy touch back in the maze at Thornbridge Manor—how he had cornered her there. She felt the same way then, like he had thought to find them there. He was approaching the three women, and bowed to them with false gallantry.

“Miss Sweet!” he said, addressing Dinah first. “I did not get a chance to congratulate you on your engagement.” There was a bit of a snide tone to his statement, something which put Lucy on her guard almost immediately.

“Thank you, Mr Stalton,” Dinah said, keeping her tone reserved and polite. “Though, I won’t likely be the only engaged woman in this group for long.” She beamed at Lucy.

Mr Stalton laughed loudly. The three women looked at him, surprised by his reaction.

“You’re talking of Silas, of course,” he said, his hands folded behind his back.

“My brother is courting Miss Wilds,” Dinah replied. “As you may well know by now.”

He sighed, shaking his head. His eyes were large and he was looking at Lucy sadly, as though he *pitied* her. Lucy felt angry. *Why does he look at me in that way?* she wondered. She began to panic a little. Was this another one of his cruel tricks?

“I suppose he hasn’t told you, then?” he asked, his eyes going wider. Lucy’s heartbeat thundered in her ears. She was blushing again, but for a different reason. She wanted to run away, but her knees were locked, holding her in place.

“What are talking about, Mr Stalton?” Dinah asked. Lucy was glad that she wasn’t the only one who was confused. For if Dinah didn’t know, then perhaps it was one of his awful, mean-hearted tricks.

“During the party at Thornbridge Manor,” he replied, looking right at Lucy. “Silas lost a bet to me, in regard to bagging a buck. If I lost, I was to wear a dunce cap to dinner. If Silas lost, he was to court Miss Wilds.” His eyes fell on Lucy. They seemed to pin her in place.

“It can’t be true,” she said, hardly able to believe her ears.

“Unfortunately, it is,” he told her. “He has used you most grievously, Miss Wilds. I do not believe that he cares for you. Not really. He simply cannot stand down from a bet.” He looked at Dinah. “You

know what a sore loser your brother is."

The three women shared a confused glance. Lucy felt devastated. She could feel something inside of her break. Her vision blurred as her eyes filled with tears.

"Well, I must be off," Mr Stalton said. "I hope I've done right in telling you, but I can see that you're suffering under Silas' lies."

Lucy nodded, though she wasn't really paying any attention to Mr Stalton as he bowed to them and left. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She heard herself whimper, then she covered her mouth with her hand as she burst into sobs. Aunt Joan and Dinah grabbed each of her arms, protecting her.

"Oh, Lucy," Dinah said. "I—I knew nothing of this. Percy might be lying. Surely, he is."

"No, I don't believe that he is," Lucy replied, remembering how angry Silas had been when Percy had hinted that he'd "followed through after all." Men, her heart then remembered, truly weren't any good. She covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her sobs. She hated that she was in public. Passersby were glancing over at her. She felt as though she was in a bad dream, one from which she might wake at any second.

Aunt Joan took Lucy's hand. "Come, let's get you home."

After they returned to the house in Harley Street, Dinah came with them, making sure that Lucy was comfortably ensconced on the settee in the parlour. Lucy stared down at the wadded up, damp handkerchief in her hands. She was miserable. The bad dream hadn't ended, nor would it. This was all real.

"I'm going to go and have a talk with my brother," Dinah announced. "I'll get to the bottom of this."

"Do, dear Dinah," Aunt Joan said. "I'll take care of Lucy."

Dinah took Lucy's hand. When she looked into her friend's eyes, Lucy could see angry tears there. She knew that Dinah was on her side. She was a true friend.

"If it's true, then he will be sorry," Dinah promised her.

Lucy attempted to smile in gratitude but failed, the corners of her lips unable to bend upwards. More tears fell down her cheeks. She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

Dinah left, and Aunt Joan went to fix some tea. Alone, Lucy felt the distinct desire to do something. So, she got up from the settee, walking over to the little writing table in the corner.

She began to write Silas a letter, releasing him from any obligation to her. She wanted to take some of her power back. She couldn't continue—not after he had betrayed her, right from the start.

Dear Silas,

Mr Stalton was so kind as to tell me all about how and when your affection for me was born. I must admit, I was blindsided. I was under the impression that you truly were in love with me, as I was in love with you.

If it is true, which I believe it is, then you do not love me at all. You have hurt me, more than anyone has hurt me before.

A tear fell from her eye and onto the paper, causing the wet ink to splatter across the page. That would make it worse, real evidence that she was crying over his betrayal.

"Damn it," she hissed, in a most unladylike manner. She crumpled the unfinished letter in her hand. Getting up and taking it over to the fireplace, she knelt down on the hearthstones. She took a match and held it to the note, slowly lighting it on fire.

He's not worth giving an explanation to, she told herself as she watched the paper set fire then curl into ash. *Not when he would treat me in such a manner.*

She wondered when he had planned to tell her. When she'd already married him, and was stuck with him for the rest of her life? Or before, when, instead of asking for her hand, he revealed all, letting her know just how little she'd meant to him.

She decided that it was likely the latter. He wouldn't have allowed himself to be stuck with her. He would have shed himself of her, as easily as a snake sheds its skin.

Chapter 48

Silas returned home after visiting the solicitor. All of his father's estate was now settled. He was arranging for Michael's house to be built out in the country.

The money was there, he just needed to hire someone to design it according to his brother's wishes. In the spring, the two brothers would go there to get everything started. After Dinah's wedding, and after the London Season was over.

Silas hoped that, by then, he would have asked Lucy to marry him. Perhaps, he would have both her and Miss Joan accompany him and Michael out to Thornbridge Manor. He was thinking of a spring wedding for himself and Lucy, at the little church in Shere. He could think of nothing better.

Silas, having nothing to do for once, sat down in the study. He had a glass of brandy, and was merely sitting, enjoying the warm fire. It was a cool November day. Outside, it was sunny, with a bit of a chill. He stared into the flames, which crackled merrily in the grate. As he sat, he thought about Lucy meeting him in the tiny country church. She would have flowers in her hair, and she might even wear her blue and cream striped dress.

He heard the sound of the front door opening and suspected that his sister was home, after visiting Lucy. Eager for any news of the woman he loved, Silas sat up a bit straighter.

The door opened and Dinah entered. She still had her bonnet, cloak, and gloves on, which should have been his first warning that something was wrong.

"Dinah!" he said, then paused. She was glowering at him, clearly enraged. Her hands were balled into fists at her sides. "What's the matter?"

Dinah was so rarely angry. It took a lot to get her into a rage, and it was so very rare that Silas sat back. He was concerned—what could have happened?

"What's the matter?" she demanded. "I was walking in the park with Miss Wilds and Lucy, and we ran into Percy Stalton, who told us all about the bet that you made with him last summer."

"Oh." As his sister spoke, he had a sinking feeling. He had hoped that this would never come to light. Everything had fallen apart while he had sat comfortably in front of the fire, making plans for his marriage to Lucy.

"Oh? So, it's true, then?" she asked, her face dissolving into sadness. It seemed she had been hoping that he would be able to tell her that it wasn't true.

He swallowed. Silas couldn't lie to his sister. "Yes, it's true."

Dinah took a moment, nodding. She looked away from him. "I can hardly even look at you," she said, covering her face with her hands. "I'm so disappointed in you. This is bad behaviour. Even for you."

Silas waited, fully prepared to be given a dressing-down. Dinah lowered her hands, looking at them. She seemed to shrink where she stood, her rage having been spent.

"You've hurt Lucy most severely," she told him. "I don't know if she'll ever see you again." She finally raised her eyes, skewering him with a look that was equal parts anger and sadness. "I thought that you were maturing, the past several months."

"I am," he insisted. "I have. Please, Dinah, you must believe me when I say that I truly love Lucy."

She studied him, as though there was no hope for him. "Then you will go to her, immediately," she told him. "You owe her an explanation."

"Yes. I do, and I will."

Dinah nodded, turning away from him. Silas listened as she walked down the hall and he sighed, finishing his brandy in one gulp. She was right, of course. He needed to go straightaway, or risk losing Lucy forever.

Silas arrived at the house on Harley Street not long after his talk with Dinah. He felt sick. Of course, there were many things he should have done differently, and would have, if he could. As he had ridden over

in the carriage, he had planned what he was going to say. He was going to reveal all to Lucy, then prostrate himself before her and beg for her forgiveness.

If she truly loved him, then maybe she could find it inside of herself to forgive him. He was sure that she would. She was so good, and he had done something horrible. And he would certainly never do it again. He was ready to prove his love for her, in any way that he could.

He would shower her with gifts—books, paints. Anything that would please her. He would prove himself by asking her to marry him, then and there, to show her just how committed he was to her. They could even marry the very next day, if she wished.

Facing the familiar black door, he raised his hand and knocked. It was a long while before the door opened, and Miss Wilds peered out. She didn't seem surprised to see him. Her mouth was a thin line. She looked tired and sad. Not that he could blame her. He felt awful. Lucy was not the only one who he had harmed—those who loved her, Miss Wilds and Dinah, were upset, too.

"Lord Thornbridge," Lucy's aunt said carefully. She said nothing else. It was a greeting, and nothing more. Which meant that she was not to allow him inside. It was as certain as if she had slammed the door shut in his face. He was not ready to give up yet, however. The door was still open, and she seemed to be waiting.

"I've come to see Lucy," he explained. "I owe her an explanation."

"She's not taking any visitors at the moment." Miss Wilds was firm. Silas knew that if he was genuine, then perhaps she could persuade Lucy to see him.

“Miss Wilds,” he said. “There’s been a grave misunderstanding.”

“So, the bet didn’t happen? Mr Stalton lied?” she asked hopefully.

“Not entirely.”

Miss Wilds’ face fell, and she shook her head sadly. “Then I am sorry to say that I cannot allow you entry. I must say, Lord Thornbridge, I am thoroughly disappointed in your behaviour. Your parents would be sorely disheartened to know that you would treat a young woman of modest means in this manner. Good day, My Lord.” She closed the door gently. Silas stared at it for a long moment, feeling like he’d been slapped.

He had not expected this. To be turned away, without at least an explanation. Things were much worse than he’d thought. He didn’t know what to do. He was so upset that he could barely think.

Devastated, Silas turned away from the door. He began to walk towards the carriage. The coachman stood beside it, his face impassive.

I’ve ruined everything, Silas thought as he climbed inside. He sat back on the velvet seat as the coachman closed the door.

“Where to, My Lord?” he asked Silas from up on the box.

“I—I don’t know.” Where to go? What to do? His mind swam.

If Miss Wilds couldn’t be prevailed upon to allow him to explain, then his relationship with Lucy was surely doomed by what he had done.

He decided to head for Thornbridge Manor. Perhaps, with time, Lucy would begin to soften towards him. He reached into his pocket, finding that he still carried the paper with the coordinates.

It’s as good a time as any to abscond to the countryside for a few days.

He didn’t want to face Dinah, or Michael, for that matter. This way, it would give everyone at least a week to reflect. Perhaps, with time, Lucy would find it in her heart to forgive him. Returning over and over again in the next few days would only serve to make her angrier.

“Home, please,” Silas ordered. The coachman urged the horse into a fast clip through the streets of London. Silas’ thoughts were disordered and upset, like a house of cards which had been knocked over. Percy Stalton had been the one to slam his hand into them.

If I see hide or hair of Percy, I don’t know what I’ll do to him. It was one thing to be angry with Percy. It was another to be mad at himself. It was, he knew, mostly his own fault. And he couldn’t get away from himself.

He returned home, where he packed a bag and ordered for Black Jack to be saddled. He made it back out the door before either of his

siblings could come out and ask him what he was up to.

He accepted the reins from the groom, then climbed into the saddle. Within a few hours, he was on the road for Thornbridge Manor. It was a relief to be headed home. Silas loved the city, but his heart was in the green, rolling hills of the countryside. It was where he found the most peace. He wanted to be comforted, because his heart was in pieces.

If Lucy no longer loves, me I don't know what I'll do.
He could only hope that with time, she would find it within herself to allow him to explain. He was sure that once she had heard it, she would forgive him. But he feared the worst—that she would no longer love him. Not after this.

Chapter 49

There was a fire crackling in the grate. Over the mantel, the clock ticked the seconds as they passed. The kitten that Aunt Joan had gotten from her friend was purring beside Lucy. Lucy had named the calico tabby Jocasta.

Lucy sat curled up on the settee, with a warm shawl draped over her shoulders. For the past hour or so, she had remained there, with her sketchbook open in her lap and a charcoal stick in her hand.

She hadn't been doing anything, just shading different shapes that she had sketched. In the absence of anything to do but wallow in her shame and grief, she kept her hands busy. She tried not to think too much and failed.

Downstairs, Lucy could hear Aunt Joan talking to Silas, though she couldn't hear what they were saying. She listened as the front door closed, and then she waited while her aunt walked, alone, to the parlour.

"Who was at the door?" she asked, even though she knew. She reached out to pet Jocasta, who batted playfully at her hand with a tiny paw.

"It was Lord Thornbridge," Aunt Joan told her. When Lucy looked up, her aunt stood in the doorway, her hands folded in front of her.

“You sent him away?”

“I asked him if he had truly made that bet,” she replied. “He said that he did, but he could explain.”

“To have lost your good opinion is a fall from grace, indeed,” Lucy mused, disappointed that Silas couldn’t even refute Mr Stalton’s nasty claim. That made things worse—confirmed it, even. *Am I surprised*? she wondered.

“I would do anything to protect you, my dear.”

“Thank you, Aunt Joan.”

A fresh outpouring of tears was threatening. The familiar setting of the parlour began to blur. She reached for the handkerchief that she had next to her, smearing charcoal on the white cloth.

“How about I fix you something to eat?” Aunt Joan suggested.

“At a time like this? I feel absolutely sick,” Lucy declared. Aunt Joan didn’t know about Edward, who had sworn her to secrecy about their courtship and then, their engagement. Lucy had been heartsick at the time. However, she had been able to grieve the end of it in secret. Now, though, everyone would know Lucy’s shame.

“You must keep your strength up,” Aunt Joan urged.

“How can I?” Lucy picked up the kitten, holding her small, furry warmth in her lap. Jocasta flipped onto her back, splaying her tiny paws out and batting at Lucy’s hand. Lucy scratched the kitten’s soft belly.

“Because I would miss you,” Aunt Joan said softly. Lucy’s eyes met Aunt Joan’s. Her aunt smiled at her encouragingly. “Not to mention, it would be a slight towards Lord Thornbridge if you did not die of heartbreak over him.” Aunt Joan knew exactly what to say to coax Lucy to do something.

“All right,” Lucy agreed. “I will eat a slice of toast, but only to spite Silas.”

“And a cup of tea, perhaps?”

Lucy nodded. Aunt Joan was right—she shouldn’t punish herself for something she didn’t do. She had entered into the courtship in full honesty and true affection. When she had said that she was in love with him, she’d meant it. Silas was the one who should be devastated over the fallout. She didn’t think that he was. What kind of a gentleman started a courtship with a woman over a bet? And then claimed to love her?

From what Mr Stalton had implied, Silas hadn’t even found her attractive. It had all been a cruel joke. She had known that Mr Stalton was nasty—she hadn’t thought that Silas was. A hot tear slipped down her cheek, and she brushed it away. She closed her sketchbook and set it aside, snuggling the kitten to her chest.

Once Aunt Joan returned, Lucy picked at her toast and tea. She was doing this for her aunt's benefit, so she made an effort to chew and swallow, washing it down with a sip of tea. Everything tasted like dust in her mouth. After feeling so alive over the past few weeks, she felt like everything was lacking.

Her life stretched in front of her with the knowledge that she could have been happy, but had been denied that happiness—twice. She had dared to imagine another life, and now would only feel its lack.

"Now," Aunt Joan said, settling down into one of the armchairs. "What do you plan to do? Because he's going to return."

"I'm sure he'll get the idea, eventually." *If I never see him again, it will be a blessing,* she thought. Then she realized that if she was to continue her friendship with Dinah, she would certainly run into him at the wedding. She wouldn't be able to get around it. Though, once Dinah was married, Lucy wouldn't have to go around to the Viscount's town home to see her.

It would be only one possible encounter. She could certainly get through it. She could avoid him through the whole thing, she thought to herself, though it made her want to start crying again.

"Lucy," Aunt Joan said, cutting into her thoughts. "He wants to explain."

“I’m sure he does.”

“Lucy.” Aunt Joan looked at her sternly.

“He’s hurt me, Aunt Joan. More than anyone has ever hurt me before!” It was true enough. While Edward had hurt her, this betrayal was far worse. Silas had made a fool of her in public. Everyone would know about the ending of their courtship. Everyone would talk about how Lord Thornbridge had made a cruel bet. It made Lucy feel cheap in her pain. She hated caring about what the ton thought.

“He came to explain,” Aunt Joan pointed out. “Perhaps there’s a reasonable explanation behind all of this. I don’t particularly like the look of that Mr Stalton. He seems like an unsavoury sort.”

“Nor do I. But you said it yourself—Silas said that it was true.”

“But he also said that there’s an explanation and that he loves you, Lucy. What if the bet was the way that things started, but then he found that he truly cares for you?”

Lucy didn’t know how she felt about that. She looked down at the plate of toast that was on her lap. “Then everything that I thought was true is still false.”

“Not all of it.” Aunt Joan sighed. “Not all marriages begin with love, but it develops, over time. There are many couples who fall in love over the years that they are together. Think about it. You don’t have to decide now, but perhaps speaking to him will give you the closure that you need.”

“I’ll be able to think of nothing else,” she said miserably.

“I know, in my heart, that he cares for you,” Aunt Joan told her.

“Then you’re the only one. I don’t think he loved me at all.”

Lucy had a deep ache in her chest. It was like Silas had punched a hole through her sternum and ripped out her heart. The absence felt painful. It was far worse than what Edward had done. Because Lucy believed that Silas was different, and that he had truly loved her as she had deserved.

Chapter 50

The very next morning, there was a knock at the door. Lucy's stomach did a painful twist, as she expected it to be Silas, there to demand to be allowed in. She swallowed. *I'm not ready*, she thought anxiously. *I'm not ready to listen to his lies.* She clenched her hands into fists.

Aunt Joan went to the window, peering down. She turned to Lucy, who sat on the settee wrapped in a quilt, with an encouraging smile.

"It's Miss Sweet," Aunt Lucy said, to Lucy's relief. "Will you see her?"

"Absolutely," Lucy replied. Dinah was her friend, come to make sure that she was well. She wasn't, but she could see her friend, show her that she was holding on.

Aunt Joan left, returning in a few short moments with Dinah, who sat down on the settee beside Lucy, taking her hand in her own.

"How are you, my dear?" she asked, pressing her hand.

"I have never felt so betrayed in all my life," Lucy said, tearing up immediately. "I… I thought he loved me. Then, I find out that it was all a lie."

“I myself am disappointed in my brother,” Dinah agreed. “I didn’t think he had something like this in him.”

“Where is he now?” Lucy asked. “I don’t know that I could see him.”

“Silas has fled London for the countryside,” Dinah explained. “He returned home yesterday, packed a bag, and then left almost immediately.”

“He’s left?” Aunt Joan asked in surprise. Lucy could only stare at her friend. Words failed her. There was something worse about him not even staying in the city. Silas had abandoned her entirely. He hadn’t given her time to heal. He hadn’t even waited. He had given up already.
This means that it’s really over, she thought. *He’s not even going to apologize.* It was the final nail in the coffin lid. She could hear it thumping at the bottom of the grave. Over. They were over.

A tear slipped from her eye, and she reached up to brush it away.

“Yes. Without a word to any of us,” Dinah replied. “Hopefully, he’ll return soon. The Season is starting.” She sighed. “I can’t believe he did this. I was so sure that he was stepping up to fill my father’s shoes.”

“I think we have all been misled,” Lucy pointed out.

“Well, if there’s anything that I can do,” Dinah assured her, “do let me know.”

“You’re an excellent friend and I don’t want to lose you,” Lucy told her, squeezing her hand gently. “Let’s both agree that we won’t let your brother’s betrayal ruin our friendship.” Lucy had already learned that lesson with Susan. To never allow a man to get in the way of a good friendship.

Dinah smiled. “I would like that very much,” she said earnestly.

“Good,” Lucy replied. “Because I’m going to hold you to it.”

Chapter 51

Silas had been at Thornbridge Manor for a few days. There was no one there to question his presence. The servants moved through the house quietly. Only a few remained at Thornbridge Manor all year, taking care of it while the family and the rest of the household staff were in London.

It was almost as if Silas were alone. He felt like a ghost, particularly since he moved around mostly at night, when he was unable to sleep. He could barely rest. His mind travelled in circles. There was no one to blame but himself. If he hadn't agreed to that horrid bet, then he could have pursued Lucy, with no danger to losing her. All he'd had to do was not rise to Percy's bait.

Silas often found himself sitting in his father's bedchamber, which was lit only by the thin slice of sunlight coming in through the drawn curtains. Now that Silas was the viscount, the master suite should have been his own. He was seated in his father's chair, staring at the bed. Everything here was as Josiah Sweet had left it, the day that he had gone off to London. It felt as though his father would walk in at any moment.

Silas was constantly reminded of the last time he had been there. It had been a happy time. The last place he had seen his father alive. Josiah Sweet had been thriving. He loved throwing parties and hosting many guests at Thornbridge all at once. But he had received that letter from London, which had prompted him to leave immediately.

He still wondered at that. Why had his father gone, alone? Especially

at a time when he had so many guests? Silas knew that his father took his position seriously, yet he could have sent either one of his sons, in his stead.

What if I had gone, in his place? He would still be alive today. All I had to do was offer. He would have stayed at the party.

With a jolt, he recalled exactly why he'd remained at the party. Lucy. Now, it seemed, he had lost her. He glanced at the window, where he could see the sunlight coming through the thick red velvet curtains.

It was a cool, sunny day. Anyone else would be in a good mood. It was nearly time for the London Season to start. Most nobles would be starting to arrange for their removal to the city.

Silas wasn't sure how long he would remain. Perhaps, he should skip the Season. Except… he would be expected. Needed for the House of Lords in Parliament. As viscount, it was his duty, one which he could not forgo. Not to mention, Dinah was getting married in late January. He would be needed before then, to help plan and pay for what she needed.

Although, Michael could do it just as well.

There was something that Silas needed to attend to, here in the country. Something which couldn't be put off any longer. He stood up and then left the room, moving through the house unobserved. His footsteps echoed in the silent halls.

Silas opened the front door, hearing the sound of the butler's steps, as

he came to check on him.

“I’ll return soon,” Silas told him.

“Very good, My Lord,” he replied, bowing. “Shall I have dinner ready?”

“Please.” Silas closed the large, heavy wooden door after him. He squinted in the bright sunlight. It was several hours before dark. He had wiled most of the day away, lost in deep thought.

When he reached the bottom of the front steps, he fumbled in his breast pocket, pulling out the coordinates, scrawled in his father’s familiar, neat hand.

Father’s last treasure hunt, he told himself. He felt a combination of grief and hope. Perhaps, whatever was at the end would give him some sort of closure.

He began to walk, heading for the location. For the first time since his falling out with Lucy, he felt a small measure of hope. He didn’t know what to expect, but he ached for a positive discovery. It was to the northwest of the property, through several empty fields. He walked with a sense of purpose. Whatever he found buried there, it would be some sort of a clue. To what, though, he had no idea.

Overhead, birds wheeled through the sky in large flocks. The leaves on the trees were a bright profusion of fall colours. Silas’s breath fogged in the crisp air.

In order to get to the coordinates, he had to jump the white-painted fence that lined the entirety of the Thornbridge estate. He climbed over it, the rough wood barking his shin. He landed on both feet on the other side.

It was the middle of a wide field. At one time, it had belonged to the farmer whose property abutted Thornbridge estate. Silas and his siblings had passed this field many times while riding their ponies as children. When it had been a part of the farm, it had been filled with brown and white splotched cows. Now, though, it was empty, a sure sign that it was no longer a part of the farm.

When he reached the very point, he found that the ground had been disturbed. Someone had dug up whatever had been buried. Silas' stomach clenched as he panicked. Maybe, they didn't find it, he thought.

His heart thudding in his chest, he poked around, looking to see if there was anything there. He used the toe of his boot to dig in the ground. When it revealed nothing, he knelt down in the rich black dirt, using his hands to move it around. The mud stuck underneath his fingernails as he scrabbled about. Panic and dismay overwhelmed him as he came to an awful realization.

Whoever had come before Silas had taken whatever his father had hidden there. The knowledge was hard to swallow. He exhaled, his grief suddenly hitting him like a brick wall.

With a sigh, he sat back on his haunches, staring at the open ground. It reminded him of a gaping wound. He sniffled, using his sleeve to wipe at his eyes.

Silas had expected to find some sort of a memento from his father. Something which would give him cause to remember him, and to know what he'd been thinking during the final days of his life.

Silas stood up, brushing the dark dirt off of his hands. His nails had black crescent moons of earth stuck under them. This was another source of loss. He had to force himself away from it, back across the field and over the fence.

He had never been so devastated and disappointed in his life. It took every ounce of willpower that he had to leave this spot. He could only imagine his father, coming there to happily bury a gift for his children to find later. He would have been excited and pleased with himself. Whatever it was, it would have been thoughtful.

As Silas walked back to Thornbridge Manor, tears flowed freely down his cheeks. He had lost everything that mattered. His father, Lucy, and the good opinion of his brother and sister. Which meant that he was likely alone in the world. Dinah would marry. Michael would go his own way. They would leave Silas to himself. He would live a long, lonely life. Even Levi would be disappointed in him. Though, there was a small chance that his good friend would be willing to forgive him.

I just didn't realize until I'd lost all of them how much they mattered to me. If I could do it all over, I would have done it very differently.

He knew that if he could have, then he wouldn't have pretended to not be interested in Lucy. He would never have made that stupid bet. And he certainly would have acted much differently towards his father. He would have done his utmost to be better.

It was a lesson learned too late. He wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his jacket. He didn't know what he would do if he returned and Lucy still wanted nothing to do with him. He didn't know if he could go on. He had to return, however. He didn't have a choice in the matter. He was now Lord Thornbridge. He had to figure out how to fix things. For things were broken, perhaps irrevocably. All that he could do was try, though.

If only I could figure out how to begin, he thought.

Chapter 52

A week had passed. Lucy remained in the house, mourning Silas' betrayal. She tiptoed about, avoiding Aunt Joan and her friends. She spent most of her time snuggling the kitten, until Jocasta would wiggle out of her arms and disappear down the hall, her tiny paws making no sounds as she went.

Lucy felt bad for lying to Aunt Joan about the mouse in the larder. Silas wasn't worth the exertion and pains that she had taken to hide that he had been there while her aunt was out. Though, she was pleased to have Jocasta. It had been a while since they had owned a cat. She'd forgotten how much she loved having one.

For the past few days, Lucy would pick at her food, her mind agonizing over the fact that she'd been tricked, again. She wondered if and when Silas would return. It was starting to become agonizing, half expecting him to come to the door, half dreading it.

Finally, there was a knock on the door, and Lucy passed a few very tense moments before she heard Susan answering Aunt Joan's greeting.

She was standing in front of her current painting, feeling frozen. The joy had slipped out of her life. She was attempting to get it back and failing. Lucy removed her smock, setting it aside, then cleaned her hands of paint.

By the time Aunt Joan and Susan had come up the stairs, she was

presentable. She hadn't been taking much pains with how she looked. Her hair was pulled back in a neat bun, without the modish curls framing her cheeks. Heating up the iron was beyond her these days. She was dressed and neat, nothing more. There was no one to impress but herself, and she was not interested.

"Lucy! Are you well?" Susan asked. She was wearing a beautiful black hat, which was tilted jauntily on top of her elaborately done hair. It had a cockade of brilliant sunny feathers. She had on a golden-coloured dress with a matching Spencer jacket. In her hands, she held a black sable muff.

"No," Lucy replied, swallowing. She felt washed out beside Susan, who was always dressed brightly.

"What's happened?" Susan asked, seeing how unhappy Lucy was. Her brows were furrowed in concern. Lucy knew that she should have written, but she had been too miserable to reach out.

"Silas has betrayed me," Lucy said, the words hurting even more now that she'd said them. Again, the world blurred as tears filled her eyes. She swallowed, refusing to cry again.

The two friends sat down and Susan took both of Lucy's hands in her own. Her hands were warm; only then did Lucy realized how cold she felt.

"Oh, Lucy," Susan said. "Tell me."

"He made a bet," Lucy explained, "that if he didn't bag a buck, then

he had to court me." There was still an ache in her chest, a yearning for him—or at least for who she had thought him to be.

"Oh, Lucy." Susan's eyes were wide.

"He lost the bet to Mr Stalton," she went on, "and apparently, he has been fulfilling it to the best of his abilities."

"What an absolute scoundrel! And he never came to explain himself?" There was fire in Susan's tone. Lucy realized that she had two very loyal friends who would, in a battle, fight for her. She was lucky to have Susan and Dinah. It wasn't often that someone was so blessed.

"Well, he did. But Aunt Joan made him leave."

"What did he say to Miss Joan?" Susan asked.

"That the bet was true. But that there was an explanation, and he loves me." Lucy swallowed, for she was near to tears again. She took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She had cried enough over the past week.

Susan tilted her head to the side. "It sounds like he fell in love with you, Lucy."

"No, it sounds like everything that I thought was true was all a cruel joke and a lie." She reached for her handkerchief, which she kept close to her at all times.

“Well, if he really loves you, then what does it matter how it started?” Susan asked. Lucy looked at her, surprised to hear her say it.

“You think I should give him another chance then?” she asked, incredulous.

“I do. Wholeheartedly.” Susan took her hand. “Not everyone is perfect. Look at us! We sacrificed our friendship over Edward Russ.”

“He certainly wasn’t worth it.” It seemed that Lucy was doomed to repeat her past transgressions with men over again. She wasn’t sad anymore. Her anger flared within her. She wished that she could fight back, an avenging angel against men with impure intentions.

“No, but we’ve both given each other a second chance, haven’t we?” Susan pointed out.

“That’s different, Susan. We were both mistaken. Silas knew he was pursuing me for a cruel bet. He hid it well.”

“At least hear him out,” she replied. “What have you to lose?”

“My dignity. My self-respect,” Lucy stated.

“But if you don’t,” Susan pointed out, “then you might be sacrificing

the love of your life. If you don't at least listen to his explanation, you might regret it forever."

"Don't you recall what happened with Edward Russ? It's the same thing happening all over again, except worse this time, because I really thought that Silas actually loved me."

Susan smiled at her. "I think that you need to talk with Lord Thornbridge," she said, "before coming to that conclusion. Edward was only out for money. It sounds to me like Lord Thornbridge began fulfilling a bet and then surprised himself by falling head over heels in love with you."

Lucy sighed. She didn't know if that made her feel better. She would have liked to believe it to be true. However, she didn't know. And she was too hurt to be inclined to find out.

"At least think about it," Susan insisted.

"I will," Lucy assured her. She didn't want to have any regrets. Her anger at Silas was hot, searing. She was tired of hurting. Lucy wished that she had protected herself better. She wished she could have seen Silas for who he truly was.

But she hadn't. She only really had herself to be angry with. The one person who she couldn't escape.

Chapter 53

Silas was sitting in his father's room at Thornbridge Manor again. He knew that, someday, he was going to have to start moving his father's things out of it. As the master of Thornbridge Manor, he should be using the master suite. He couldn't yet bring himself to do so.

When Silas had returned from finding nothing but an empty hole where his father had buried his last gift to his children, he had ordered the butler to bring him a bottle of wine. He sat, drinking and wishing that his father was there. The sweet taste of the wine permeated his tongue and slowly dulled the pain. That was where Levi found him, hours later.

"I thought the butler was supposed to be my gatekeeper," Silas mused glumly.

"Well, I have a very sternly-worded letter from Michael on me, informing the servants to let me inside immediately," Levi replied. He handed the paper in question over to Silas. The seal had been broken, and the letter unfolded. Silas scanned it, seeing his brother's hand, instructing the person to whom it was presented to allow Levi in, to check on Silas' wellbeing.

It sounds like my brother is concerned for me. Not, in fact, angry at all, he thought in surprise.

"My brother sent you?" Silas said, perking up a little bit. Someone still cared. That was a revelation. Despite what Silas had done, Michael

still had concern for his welfare. And Levi, too.

“He has,” Levi replied. “Someone needed to come. Since I was only at my grandfather’s estate, I was happy to come at once. You have everyone concerned about you, you know.”

“I wasn’t sure that anyone would be, after…” Not after what he’d done to Lucy. He recalled Dinah’s face, twisted in cold fury. He supposed, since Lucy was her friend, it had been warranted. She had never been so angry before. Not in all of Silas’ memory. “After what I did to Lucy,” he said at last.

“Tell me what happened.” Levi sat down on the bed. He waited for Silas to explain, folding his hands in his lap. Silas was grateful to his friend for riding all of the way from his grandfather’s estate to check on him. It meant the world that he was there.

“I should never have agreed to that bet,” he said at last. “I should have never lied about not being attracted to her.”

“You were? Always?” Levi asked. His brows were furrowed, though his lips smiled.

“From the moment I laid eyes on her.” He remembered—Lucy, standing beside Dinah in the garden. “She was in the garden, when I arrived back from town. It was the day before the party started. I had the briefest thought that she was very pretty, and that I didn’t know who she was, but was determined to find out.”

“Why haven’t you told her that?” Levi wondered aloud.

Silas sighed heavily. “She refuses to see me. Her aunt won’t even let me inside to see her.”

“Miss Joan Wilds?” Levi’s brows shot upward in surprise. Silas nodded. Miss Joan Wilds was one of the kindest people in all of their acquaintance. To have lost her good opinion was a fall from grace from which Silas might never recover.

“Yes. She’s quite fierce when provoked,” he said with a bitter laugh.

“Well, from the sound of it, Miss Lucy has been like a daughter to her. She would certainly act like any other mother figure would in that same situation.”

“Yes. I can’t blame her. I am a scoundrel at best.” He took a deep drink of his wine. He was starting to feel warm, fuzzy at the edges. The wine was working its magic.

“What exactly are you planning to do, Silas?” Levi asked. Silas’ gaze met his friend’s. Levi was deeply concerned. Silas considered the question at length. He wanted to remain there, in the silence and stillness of Thornbridge Manor.

“I know that I need to return to London,” he said. “I just don’t want to.”

“I’ll ride back with you,” Levi suggested. Silas’ eyes met Levi’s. Slowly,

he smiled.

“That would be much appreciated, my friend.”

“Good. Good.” Levi clapped his hands. “Now, are you going to share that wine, or are you planning on keeping it to yourself?”

“Let’s go and find you a glass,” Silas suggested, grabbing the bottle in one hand and his glass in the other. He downed his drink in one go.

The two friends both stood up and then walked out of the room. Silas was glad to have a plan of action. He was also very happy to not be alone. Levi always anticipated the needs of others. Silas was very lucky to have him.

Chapter 54

Lucy had been working on a different painting. She had forsaken the lurid work of the two lovers in favour of a still life. She had managed to go out to the market to buy some pears. She had also stopped by the flower stall, purchasing a bouquet of daisies to complete the composition.

It was, on the whole, innocuous, safe from any heady, romantic notions or feelings. She arranged it so that natural light spilled across her model—five pears arranged in a bowl, with the pure white daisies and their bright yellow centres spilling out of their paper wrapping on the table beside it. It was cheery and light.

For the first time, she began to feel like herself. The best thing about painting was that it took her out of herself and her grief. She was entirely focused on recreating the colours and the shapes before her. She was working, and that brought her some peace.

She slowly began to paint, her brush moving slowly as she began to mimic line and form on the canvas. She hadn't felt this well since before she had gone to Thornbridge Manor.

He set me off-balance, she reasoned. *He swept me off my feet, and I lost my sense of self.*

She was slowly returning to the Lucy she had once been. There, in the quiet peace of her own home, she was finding her way back. It was a promising feeling. That nothing—no one—could ruin her. She was

able to heal herself. She didn't need a man. Nor could a man destroy her. Lucy was strong.

Aunt Joan was wrong, she thought. *It will do very well that I will be never be married. I will never see him again.*

Her throat tightened at the thought. A traitorous tear fell down her cheek. Before she knew it, she was kneeling on the floor, sobbing. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if to hold herself together.

Aunt Joan came running from wherever she had been inside of the house. "Lucy," she said, pausing beside her niece. "What's the matter?"

"I loved him, Aunt Joan. I loved him," she cried.

"Oh, Lucy." Aunt Joan knelt on the floor with her, holding her in her arms, just like she had when Lucy was small. "My poor dear. I'm so sorry. I am so sorry."

Lucy cried until she couldn't anymore. She leaned her head against her aunt's shoulder, allowing herself to be held and comforted. She sniffled.

"I don't know what I would do without you, Aunt Joan."

"You'll never have to know, dear Lucy." Her aunt touched her fingers beneath Lucy's chin, as she had done since Lucy was small. "It's us

against the world," she promised. "Always."

Chapter 55

Levi and Silas sat at the dining room table at Thornbridge Manor. Since the rest of the household was in London, they were being served by the butler, instead of footmen.

They had drunk until dinner was announced. Silas felt warm, buoyed by the wine. All of his pain had dulled, though there was still an ache which tugged at his heart.

Dinner was a quiet affair—in Mrs. Larson's absence, a woman from in town had been hired to cook for them. It was simple fare, nothing like Mrs. Larson's extravagant dinners. He was pouting, he knew.

"I'm not used to Thornbridge being so quiet," Silas remarked as he sliced into his meat. He placed a bite into his mouth and chewed. He missed Mrs. Larson, the cook. She was, of course, in London with Michael and Dinah. The family went nowhere without her—she spoiled them with her talents.

"No," Levi agreed, spearing a chunk of roasted potato on the end of his fork. "It's usually brimming with life." He popped it into his mouth and chewed.

"It was all my father's doing," Silas replied, sitting back in his seat. He should have been at the head of the table, but couldn't bring himself to sit there, in his father's seat. "He was so good at bringing people together."

“You could be good at it, too,” Levi pointed out, before taking another bite.

Silas sighed, looking around at the dining room. It was decorated in dark colours. The curtains were drawn, and the candlelight flickered, throwing shadows into the corners.

“I’m not my father, Levi. The past week has shown me that,” he said soberly. “I thought that I could be, but alas, I am not.”

“Silas,” Levi said. “You can’t help who you used to be. You can do something about who you will be.”

“That is sage advice,” Silas commented, taking a sip of his wine. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to take it.” He was thinking of giving it all up. He could give the title to Michael, who would do far more with it than Silas ever could. Silas could build a hunting lodge out here, where he could remain, living quietly and out of the way.

“And here is why Michael sent me,” Levi stated, taking a sip of his wine. He cleared his throat. “From everything that I’ve seen, you want to do what’s best. And you try to. The moment that things become difficult, though, you run.”

Silas stared at his friend. He was right. Levi stared back at him, as though challenging him to argue. He was neither smiling nor frowning. He knew that he was right. What was more, Silas agreed with him.

Silas raised his glass to him. “You’re right, of course.”

“Thank you. Of course, I am. I’ve known you for ages.” Levi raised his own glass, clinking it against Silas’. They both drank in silence for a long moment.

“So, what do you propose that I do, my wise friend?” Silas asked, his chin in his hand, his elbow on the arm of his chair. He crossed his legs.

“Return to London,” Levi said. “Then go immediately to Miss Wilds. Do not leave until you see her. Beg for her forgiveness. Tell her that you’ve loved her from the first moment that you beheld her. Life is far too short to just give up. If you truly love her, which I believe you do, then you need to fight for her.” He paused. “Just think, Silas. You could be happy. You could live the life that you’ve seen with her.” Levi sighed. “Or, you could stay here and be alone. The choice is yours.”

Silas nodded. He didn’t think Lucy would want to see him. He had hurt her beyond repair. However, he would see if Dinah might be amenable to helping him. Perhaps she would be able to convince Lucy to allow him the chance to apologize. Perhaps, to explain, at the very least.

“We’ll leave tomorrow morning,” Silas said, the smallest bit of a grand scheme forming in his mind. He started to feel resolute. Levi was right. He had two choices: to fight for Lucy, or to let her go. He didn’t want to let her go. He loved her too much. “At first light.”

Levi smiled at him. “Good to hear.”

The two friends returned to their meal. For the first time in nearly a week, Silas felt better. He felt a lightening inside of himself. It was hope, he realized. And his love for Lucy. It buoyed him better than the wine ever could.

Chapter 56

The ride back to London seemed to fly by. The two friends rode hard and fast. In Silas' mind, he went over how he planned to explain himself to Lucy. He planned it out, over and over again. It needed to be perfect.

When Silas returned home, he found that there was much to be done. There were things which couldn't be put off—the family businesses, Dinah's wedding plans.

The three Sweet siblings sat in the parlour. Michael had just shown him all of the things which required his attendance immediately. Silas' mind whirled. It would have been doable, had he not left. Now, though, he would have to buckle down and focus.

"I tried to keep up," Michael told him. "But there are things which only you can do." It was merely a statement of fact. His brother shrugged.

"Thank you," Silas told him. He was grateful that his brother had stepped in for him. "I won't go running off again." It was a promise. Silas was the viscount. He couldn't just leave for the country as he chose. Not without making sure that he was remaining on top of things.

Dinah sat, quietly. She was unsmiling. Silas could see the accusation in her eyes. She was so devoted to Lucy that it would be a long time before she forgave Silas, not that he blamed her.

When Michael had gone, he turned to her. “How is she?” he asked, knowing that Dinah would have gone to visit Lucy while he was gone.

“How do you think?” she replied archly. “She’s devastated. Not to mention, she was even more hurt to find that you’d gone off to the country before attempting again to see her.”

He nodded, swallowing. That had been a bad idea. Though he had needed to go there. Finding out that the coordinates had been for naught—that someone else had already been there, it had been a sort of closure for him. His father was gone, and Silas was on his own. Though, not entirely. He saw that, now.

No matter what he did, Silas still had Michael and Levi. And Dinah, too. She might be upset, but she was still there. “I hope that you’re planning to make things right, somehow?” It was a pointed question.

“Do you think she’ll see me now?” he wondered.

“I don’t know,” she replied, sadly.

“Would you please find out?” he asked. “You have to believe me, dear Dinah—I love her.”

“Then why did you leave?”

He had no real answer for that. He shrugged, shaking his head. “It’s what I do best.” He sighed. “I thought that, perhaps, time would heal things. But Levi helped me to see that it wasn’t the case.”

“That’s bad form, Silas. Even for you.” There was no anger in her tone. Just immense sadness, which was even worse.

“I want to apologize to her,” he said. “I cannot do it if she still refuses to see me.”

“I can ask her,” she replied, then speared him with a very fierce look. “But don’t ask me to sacrifice my friendship with her for your sake, brother.” She stood up, smoothing her skirts.

“I would never ask that of you,” he assured her. He was impressed by his sister. Her loyalty to Lucy was unfailing.

“Good. I will ask her if she’ll see you,” she told him. “I won’t press her, however.” She gave him a warning glare.

“That’s all I ask. Thank you.”

She gave him another look, then turned and walked out. He went up to the study, where he locked himself away. He began to go through the things that he needed to get done.

He wondered when Dinah would see Lucy. He felt wretched. He

wanted to go to her, but he knew that she would deny him, out of hand. If Dinah went, then maybe she would agree.

Then he would begin to enact his plan, to convince her that he loved her. He would start by explaining, first of all. He hoped that that would do enough. After that, he knew that there would be a lot of work on his part, to prove his love for her. He didn't yet know how he was going to achieve that. He needed a gesture of some kind, but he had no ideas as of yet.

He pulled out the decanter, studying its amber contents. He set it aside. Drinking only made him feel worse. What he had done was unforgiveable. Yet he wanted to be forgiven. He wanted to be given the chance to prove his love for Lucy.

I don't know that I deserve it, though.

Chapter 57

When Dinah called, Lucy was still working on her painting of the pears, though they were beginning to turn brown. Lucy incorporated the browns of it into her work, adding dark blue shadows to make them look even more rotten. Life was ugly, and she wanted her painting to reflect how things devolved. The flowers were already dried-up stalks, the white petals having turned brown. This, too, she had changed accordingly.

When Aunt Joan showed Dinah in, Lucy smiled, putting down her brush and palette so that she could join her friend on the settee. She removed her smock, tossing it over the back of one of the chairs.

“It’s good to see you,” Lucy said, honestly happy to see her friend.

“How have you been?” Dinah asked. She was dressed in a soft grey muslin with long, fitted sleeves, and her hair was arranged in ringlet curls, framing her cheeks. She wore a delicate oval locket on a chain around her neck. She was always dressed flawlessly, as befitted the future Marchioness of Browning.

“Well enough, I suppose.” Lucy hadn’t cried in several days, which was progress. She was still heartbroken, but she had reached a place where she was accustomed to the reality of the situation. She was working on embracing her lot in life as a spinster. Someday, she would be happy again.

“Silas returned the other night,” Dinah said, looking down at her

hands, which she folded in her lap.

“Oh.” She wondered why her friend was telling her this, though she found herself curious to know more. “How is he?”

“He’s locked himself up in his study, night and day,” Dinah said. “He’s in a very dark place.”

“I suppose that’s sad for him,” Lucy commented carefully. She didn’t know how she felt, aside from unsettled. It was clear that he felt awful for what had come out, but it wasn’t clear whether it was because he cared for her or because he’d been caught. “What do you think, Dinah?”

Dinah sighed, looking her in the eyes. “I think he truly loves you, Lucy. He says that he does, and would like to call here to apologize and explain. I said I would ask, but that I would do nothing to sacrifice our friendship.”

Lucy, refusing to be swayed, shook her head firmly. “I cannot do it, Dinah.”

“Why not?” she asked gently.

Lucy gathered her thoughts. There was something that she had never told her friend. But she was resolved to tell Dinah, for her friend needed to understand why she could never forgive Silas.

“Several years ago, this very same thing happened to me,” she explained.

“Tell me,” Dinah said softly. She reached out, taking Lucy’s hand in her own.

“I was engaged to be married,” Lucy began. “His name was Edward Russ, and I believed him to love me as much as I loved him. He seemed to understand me in a way that no one else could. We courted, in secret. He said that we should get to know each other without society’s pressure.”

Lucy swallowed. This was the part that hurt. “It turned out that he was courting several other women all at the same time, biding his time until he could find out who had the largest dowry or future inheritance.

“He proposed to me,” she explained. “But it didn’t last long, for he found another—she was to inherit ten thousand pounds upon her father’s death.”

“Oh, Lucy!” Dinah’s free hand went to her lips. Her eyes were wide with shock.

“And her father was very sick, so the inheritance looked to be imminent. I never saw Edward again. He stopped responding to the letters that I was sending him. Eventually, I heard that he was married.

“It wasn’t until I heard more rumours that he was a fortune-hunter

that I put the pieces together and discerned his true motives. Since then, I have been far too bitter to seek out another man to marry.

"I believed things would be different with Silas," Lucy admitted. "He seemed to be attracted to me in a way that I never thought possible. I merely find that I'm disappointed in myself for being tricked again."

"Let me talk to my brother," Dinah said. "Can you at least agree to see him, and let him explain himself? Allow him to do what's right and apologize to you. For I believe, in my heart, that he cares for you—and that you care for him, despite what it seems like he's done."

Lucy considered it. That seemed reasonable. Edward had never apologized. She had never seen him again. Perhaps, talking to Silas would give her closure. "Very well. I will see him."

Dinah smiled, though her eyes were sad. "I wished that we two would be sisters. Know that I wanted nothing less."

"I know. I wanted the same."

"I'm absolutely heartbroken."

"Me too, my dear friend. Even if we are not sisters by law, we will still be as close as."

Lucy felt better, for having told Dinah about Edward. It felt like she had finally let go of an unbearable burden. She felt lighter, but not

happier. Silas's betrayal weighed upon her soul. She would soon have answers. And an apology, which would perhaps help her to move on with her life.

Chapter 58

Silas sat in his study. The blinds remained drawn. He no longer cared whether it was night or day. The fire crackled in the grate. Meanwhile, he drowned his sorrows in drink.

He wondered when Dinah would go and see Lucy.

Silas knew, of course, that she might refuse to see him. Lucy was so stubborn. It was one of the things that he loved about her. But it might also be his downfall.

It had been several days since his return to London. He had dispensed with everything that had needed to be done, due to his absence. However, his despair over Lucy plagued him, and he had begun to drink while he waited for word of her.

Silas didn't want to annoy Dinah with requests to go and speak to Lucy. He knew that his sister would go. She had promised. He just wished that she would have gone immediately.

The door opened, and Dinah burst inside. He blinked at her. Light from the hallway windows gleamed in, and she wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"It smells like a distillery in here," she announced. "Really, Silas! You can't do this."

“I distinctly recall that it’s polite to knock before entering,” he muttered morosely. “If I want to drown my sorrows in drink, then that’s my prerogative, Dinah dearest.”

“I just came from visiting Lucy,” she said. It was the only thing she could have said to get him to perk up.

“How is she?” he asked, sitting up. He even pushed his glass away.

“Not happy. But she’s not wasting away,” Dinah replied pointedly, perching on the other armchair.

“She’s much better and stronger than I am.” He meant it with all his heart. She was an absolute angel and he had wronged her most severely. He didn’t know if he could live with himself.

“She is, actually.” Dinah glanced at the glass in his hand. “She’s certainly not drinking away her sorrows,” she said archly. She sat down in the other armchair, crossing her legs at the ankles. She studied him for a very long moment. “You must listen to me, Silas,” she ordered very sternly. “For you are very much in danger of losing the love of your life forever.”

“I thought I already lost her.”

She shook her head, causing the ringlets that framed her cheeks to dance. “I don’t believe so.”

“Then what must I do?” Silas would do anything to prove to Lucy that he was sorry. For the first time, he felt true hope. She had agreed to allow him to explain.

“Lucy has been hurt in the past,” Dinah explained. “She was courted by a man who used her in a most vile manner. I can’t go into it. It’s not my story to tell.”

“How… how awful.” He hadn’t known that it was possible for him to feel any worse. “I feel like the scum of the Earth. It’s like the past is repeating for her.”

“Will you stop feeling sorry for yourself?” Dinah snapped.

“I feel sorry for Lucy.”

“You’re pouting, Silas.” Dinah speared him with a look. Silas didn’t think he had ever heard his sister speak in such a harsh manner. He suddenly knew how she would be as a mother. She was stern, yet with a very long fuse. “You must try extra hard to make things up to her. I have gotten her to agree to at least listen to your explanation. I believe that if you put real effort into proving your love for her, it will pay off.”

She punctuated this with a hopeful smile, and Silas nodded, suddenly feeling like this was possible. It was like a small ray of light was opening into the dark mood that he’d been in. From the sound of it, Dinah was telling him that there was a chance for him to be with Lucy, that all was not yet lost.

“You’re going to have to sober up,” Dinah ordered, her tone brisk. “And take a bath.”

Silas nodded, standing up. “I’ll—I’ll go for a walk,” he said. “Figure out what I’m going to do.”

“Good. By the time you return, I’ll have had Mr Morton draw you a bath and send up your supper to your room.”

“Dinah,” he said, reaching out to take his sister’s hand. “Dear Dinah, what would I ever do without you?” he wondered.

“You’d be sulking in the dark,” she said, smiling at him. She patted him on the cheek. “Soaking in brandy.”

“I won’t let you down,” he promised. “I’m going to do a lot better. Starting today.”

“Good.” She left the room, walking quickly.

Silas put on his jacket and top hat, then went out for a walk. It was a cold day, with an overcast sky above. All around him, there was a seething mass of humanity. People scurried to and from, and carriages thundered by out on the road. He paid little attention to any of it.

A light rain began to fall, creating a soft haze to the atmosphere. Overhead, the clouds gathered thickly, blocking out the sun that had been shining earlier. It did nothing to dampen his mood.

As Silas walked, he thought about what he could do to prove to Lucy that he loved her. He had, truly, never loved another woman before. He had been with many, but he had never loved them. He had only loved Lucy. He would do anything to have her back.

I will spend my life proving to her that I love and cherish her.

As he walked, his mind wandered, coming up with gestures that ran from small to grandiose, none of them seeming right. His walk led him to the steps of the lending library, where he had taken her that one day which now seemed so long ago. An idea came to mind, a slow, but genuine smile coming to his face for the first time in over a week.

Chapter 59

Aunt Joan and Lucy sat in their parlour. Aunt Joan was working on a bit of sewing, and Lucy was sketching. They both had steaming cups of tea on the coffee table between them.

Jocasta the kitten was nowhere to be seen, off wandering the house somewhere in search of the mice that were nowhere to be found. She was getting larger, no longer the tiny ball of fur that Lucy could hold in the palm of her hand.

It was silent, except for the tick of the clock, and the sounds of passersby outside. Lucy let the stillness of the room seep into her veins. If she could bottle this up, she would.

“Have you heard anything from Miss Sweet?” Aunt Joan asked. “I know she said that her brother was going to come and explain himself.”

“And yet, he has not,” Lucy said. “I don’t know that I should have gotten my hopes up.” Again, Silas had failed her. It didn’t make any sense, why he would have Dinah ask her to let him come. A full two days had passed, with no sign of him. The only conclusion that she could come to was that he wasn’t actually going to show up.

“I’m so sorry,” Aunt Joan said. “I thought he was a kind gentleman. I must say, I am surprised at how things turned out.”

“I am, as well.” Lucy was tired of feeling hurt and sad over everything that had occurred. She couldn’t help that she still was. But she was weary of it.

If only I had never gone to that party at Thornbridge Manor. I would still be content with my status.

To have known what it was like to love and be loved so passionately, and then to have it torn from her so certainly was devastation beyond compare.

Once they were done with their tea, Lucy went to her room. There, she had all of her paintings set out. She looked at all of them, marvelling at how much they had changed. She had gone from stale, light-drenched still lifes to the baroque painting of the lovers in the woods, then back to still lifes, yet again. But now, there was a more immediacy to them. There was a feeling evoked in the work of the pears and the daisies. There was a sense of suffocation. She felt proud of her progress.

She looked closely at the one of the two lovers. She couldn’t believe how fanciful she had been. She wished that she hadn’t known that it existed within her to love, and to experience passion. Now that all of her hopes had been dashed for a second time, she knew the other side of that far too intimately. And the grief that came after.

Well, at least the painting wouldn’t be here for too much longer. She planned to give it to Dinah, still. For, no matter what the sins of the brother were, she would never again ruin another friendship over a man.

It was Lucy's only solace. That even though things had ended with Silas, she still had her friendship with Dinah.

Chapter 60

When Silas had returned from his walk, he had refused both dinner and bath. He had spoken to both Dinah and Michael, outlining his plans. Both of them had listened, stunned, before agreeing that it would be the perfect proof that he indeed loved her. It would take him a long while to do as he had planned. But he couldn't wait until it was completed to apologize to her.

That was something that should have been done nearly two weeks before. So, he knocked on the familiar door to the house on Harley Street, then waited. His heart was pounding in his chest. Silas had never been so nervous in his life.

All of his future happiness depended upon the success of this explanation and apology. If it didn't go well, then he would have to face a very long and miserable existence, without Lucy. He shuddered to think of it.

The door opened, and Lucy stood there. She seemed surprised to see him. She looked stunning, if a little sad around the eyes. Her hair was pulled back in a low, loose bun, a few strands framing her face. She was wearing a pale blue muslin which had a stray smudge of paint on one of the long sleeves.

"Oh," he said, completely at a loss for words. Here she was, the very being that he thought of every waking moment of the day, and even dreamed of whenever he fell into an exhausted sleep.

“I suppose you want to come inside, then?” Her tone was sad, though she seemed resigned to allow him to explain everything.

“If you would be so kind, Lucy. You—you look lovely.”

She seemed shocked, for a second, at the use of her Christian name. She recovered quickly, then stepped aside, her gaze on the floor. He followed her into the house.

She looked at him, curiously. He tried to think of something to say—anything. He was struck by the remembrance of the last time they had been alone.

“The last time that we were here alone,” he commented. “It was the happiest time of my life.”

“I’m sure it was,” she replied. “At the time, I felt the same.” She turned away from him, towards the stairs.

“I understand if you don’t care for me anymore,” he said, his heart still thumping nervously in his chest as he followed her up to the parlour. The stairs creaked beneath their feet.

“I’m very hurt to learn that you didn’t come to love me at the beginning,” she replied softly. “I should have known that I was nothing but an ordinary woman to you. At four-and-twenty, a spinster, no less.”

“No,” he said, his voice coming out harsh, broken. “You never were. Not to me.”

She frowned, though she waited. She even sat down on the settee. He knelt, before her. When he went to take her by the hand, she pulled away.

I deserved that, he thought, chastened. He remained where he was. He had been up nearly the whole night before, going over what he planned to say to her.

“I know that I’ve hurt you,” he said, looking her in the eye as he spoke. “Percy Stalton thought that he knew all, but he did not.”

“It seemed to me that he knew everything.” She studied him closely. He couldn’t read her expression; it was very guarded.

“I let him think that it was a bet that would feel like punishment to me,” he explained. “I didn’t want him to know how I felt about you, or he would have tried to woo you in front of me.” He sighed. “So, I let him think that I wasn’t eager to court you.”

She stared at him, tilting her head to the side. “I don’t understand,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with tears. “Why would you ever have to pretend in front of Mr Stalton? You are the Viscount of Thornbridge, and on that day, you were the heir to the viscountcy. No one need question you.”

“I realize how it must sound.” He was beginning to. He was learning all about his failings. And he meant never to make the same mistakes

again.

“Silas,” she said, the first tear slipping down her cheek. She quickly reached up to brush it away. “There was no need for it. If you truly cared for me, then you would have been able to court me without question.”

“I’ve been stupid.”

“Yes, you have.”

“So,” he said. “I apologize, with all my heart. I never wanted to hurt you. Never. I have wanted you from the moment that I first saw you, standing in the garden beside my sister. I have loved you from the moment that we kissed in the library at Thornbridge Manor.”

She was crying in earnest now. His heart broke, for he had caused her such suffering. He had done it—there was no one else to blame. If he hadn’t lied about how he felt, then Percy would never have made the bet to begin with.

“I am so sorry that you were hurt,” he said. “I never wanted to hurt you. I should never have hidden the bet from you. I should have told you everything. I should have protected you, shown you just how precious you are to me.

“I do not ask you to forgive me,” he went on. She gasped, covering her mouth. Tears were flowing freely down her cheeks, and it hurt him all of the way to his core. He knew that he was the one who had caused those tears, as well as many more that he hadn’t seen. “No. I do not.

Not yet. I want to prove to you that I do love you. I beg of you, give me some time."

"How long?" she asked, sniffling.

"Not too long, but just long enough," he replied, even though he had been told that his grand gesture would take nearly two months to complete. And he planned to do it perfectly. "I want to prove my love to you. I'll do it, I swear to you."

Lucy stared at him; she was clearly confused. "Do I have any other choice?" she asked miserably.

"You always do. But I beg of you, don't give up on me," he said. "Not yet." He reached out, taking her hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed it tenderly.

"Will you wait for me?" he whispered, searching in her eyes for the answer. He watched as they softened. She loved him, still. That much was clear, though he knew that she wouldn't say.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I have to think about it. I'm confused, more than anything."

He nodded thoughtfully. "That's about as much as I deserve," he remarked. "But know this, Miss Lucy Wilds, I do love you. I will prove it to you." Silas stood up. He had said everything that he had needed. She didn't seem to have anything more to say in return.

“Now, I shall see myself out.” He bowed to her. As he straightened up, his eyes attempted to meet hers. Her face was turned away from him, and he got the feeling that she was attempting not to start crying again.

It took everything that Silas had within himself to pull himself away from her. He walked straight to the door, letting himself out. It was raining, but he walked all of the way back home. It wasn’t much, but it was a start. Silas felt hopeful. Not all was lost. Lucy was not lost. He merely had to prove to her that she was everything to him.

Lucy remained where she was, listening as he left. He had apologized, and he had said that he loved her. She had no idea what he meant to do. Or when. It sounded like it was going to take a long time.

I don’t want to wait a long time. I want to feel well again. She wished that she’d thought to tell him that, when he was there.

She felt like she was stuck in Purgatory, where she was always broken-hearted. She was waiting for Silas to be a different gentleman. Someone who even he couldn’t prove that he was. She was still there when Aunt Joan returned.

“Lucy?” she called out, panic in her voice.

“I’m here, Aunt Joan.” She walked to the top of the stairs. She felt like a ghost in her own home. She was the one who haunted this house.

She just existed here. She was no longer flourishing.

“Why is the front door unlocked?” Aunt Joan asked.

“Because Silas let himself out.” She didn’t care that they had been unchaperoned. It didn’t matter. Her reputation could be anything, ruined, sterling—she was going to be a spinster, forever.

“What happened?” Aunt Joan asked, coming up the stairs. She placed a hand on Lucy’s cheek and studied her closely, as if looking for damage.

“He apologized.”

“Did you forgive him?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. She honestly didn’t. Silas’s declaration had confused her.

“Are you courting again?” Aunt Joan’s eyes travelled over Lucy’s features, as if to discern her true thoughts.

“No.” Lucy turned and began to walk to her bedchamber. She paused. “Though, he did say that he loved me,” she told her aunt. “And that he’s going to prove it to me.”

“Are you going to let him?”

“It seems I have no choice,” she remarked, bitterly. “It’s not like I’ve got suitors lining up at the door, begging me to marry them instead.”

She sighed wearily and then went into her room. She sat down at her vanity, looking at her own reflection. Her eyes were puffy and her nose was red, which seemed to be her new normal state.

She reached up and began to unpin her hair, letting it fall out of its bun and down around her shoulders. Her mind was a whirl of thoughts, all of them scattered. It seemed that Mr Stalton’s version was incorrect, aimed to hurt her. Though she didn’t know if she trusted Silas.

Her mind was filled with thoughts of him, starting with the first time she’d seen him back at Thornbridge Manor. She had been falling in love with him. She had been hurt by what Mr Stalton had said. And then, Silas had fled the city, instead of staying and apologizing.

He might have left it off for too long. It’s too little and far too late.

Chapter 61

Silas' days were full. There was so much to be done. He had the family assets to consider, as well as the small mansion that he was planning to have built for Michael. While his brother was taking the lead on the plans for the house, Silas was assisting where he could.

His nights were filled with thoughts of Lucy. He knew that he needed to keep himself on her mind. His greatest fear was that she would meet someone else in the time that it took him to finish his grand gesture. He needed to make sure that he was still in her mind, and her heart. He needed her to know that she was still in his. So, he wrote to her.

Dear Lucy,

I know that you are likely still angry with me. However, I'm thinking of you, right now. I'm always thinking of you, wondering what you're doing. It's the middle of the night, and the stars are so clear in the cold night sky.

I'm remembering that first kiss that we had, in my father's library. It was the most perfect kiss that ever a man has had.

Did you know that when you're painting, you bite your bottom lip, particularly when you're focusing?

I know that you're angry with me, and that anger is entirely valid. I have been horrible. I should have told you everything, so then we could laugh in

Percy's face.

However, I believe that you are the most perfect creature in all the world. No woman could ever compare to you. I am so deeply in love with you, that I will do all that it takes to get you back.

You will see, very soon.

All my love,

Silas.

Dearest Lucy,

I have not seen you for a full week, yet I think about you always. Do you think of me? No, don't answer that. Not unless you wish to.

How are your paintings going? What are you working on? You know, I do know of several gallery owners in London. If you would like, I could introduce you to them. I believe that they would be interested in your work. I do not say this out of personal bias, but a true belief in your work.

All my love,

Silas.

Dear Silas,

Thank you for your kind letters. You do not have to introduce me to anyone. I believe that I will continue to do my work in peace. I don't know how I could ever sit silently if I had a gallery owner knocking on my door all day. I am quite content to sit and be merely accomplished. I am enjoying the stillness of the house while Aunt Joan goes out to call upon her friends.

The kitten is napping on the windowsill beside me. You know, it's all your fault that I have a cat at all. I had to tell Aunt Joan that I saw a mouse in the kitchen. I do enjoy having Jocasta. She's an absolute delight.

This is my life, and I enjoy living it.

Sincerely,
Lucy

Dear Lucy,

I believe that you're selling yourself short. You are a brilliant painter, and you offend your own genius by calling yourself "merely accomplished." I shall prove it to you by stealing your gift to Dinah and keeping it for my

very own. Are you coming to her party? Please do not forgo coming out of a desire to avoid me.

With love,

Silas

Dear Silas,

Unfortunately, I cannot attend the party at all. Aunt Joan and I are expected to dine at Mrs Trent's. Do not blame this on yourself. We had already had plans, which we cannot put off.

Although, I must admit, I am still upset with you. You have behaved most shamefully. I think that you perjure yourself most grievously. I am not attempting *to avoid you—I am doing so successfully.*

Sincerely,

Lucy

Dearest Lucy,

You injure me! I have apologized, yet I know that I must make an act which proves my love to you, without a doubt. All will be revealed in time. Please come to the party. Dinah is most upset that you and Miss Joan will not be there. It won't at all be the same.

Do you ever think of that time that we spent in the woods? I think that you do. That painting of the lovers which you sent to Dinah (and has most certainly been received) is definitely inspired by it.

The remembrance of it brings me much pleasure. I certainly wouldn't want you to forget it.

With love,

Silas

Dear Silas,

Think whatever you like. As the artist, I will reveal nothing.

Sincerely,

Miss Lucy Wilds, Painter

Dear Miss Lucy Wilds, Painter,

The party went off without a hitch, earlier this evening. It was not the same without you. You were much missed. Dinah and I both agreed. I hope that you had an enjoyable evening dining with Mrs Trent.

I have partaken of the champagne, and the night feels so alive. It's nearly three of the clock, but I am sitting here in my room, wishing that you were here.

I think of no one but you, always. You haunt all of my thoughts.

If I could conjure you, I would.

With love,

Silas Sweet, Viscount of Thornbridge, and novice conjurer

Dear Silas, novice conjurer,

You will certainly have to do better. Alas, I am still comfortably ensconced on the settee in my parlour. I am sipping a cup of tea and am quite at my leisure. The cat sleeps on the arm of the chair. She snores.

Waiting for you to perform some magic,

Lucy

Dear Lucy,

Alas, you've called my bluff. Though I can perform small tricks, most of them involve great amounts of money. However, I wonder, would you be amenable to allowing me to call on you next Saturday?

Love,

Silas

Dear Silas,

Alas, I cannot. I will be calling upon my dear friend, Miss Susan Hamm, next Saturday. Thank you for your kind offer.

Regards,

Lucy

Dear Lucy,

Are you still upset with me?

Love,

Silas

Dear Silas,

It's not you. It's not you at all. Sometimes, I feel that I miss you with all my heart. At other times, I wonder if you are merely stringing me on with these letters, teasing me with tantalizing words and phrases. I cannot know what you mean to do. I have a feeling that you'll refuse to tell me, for you are working on some great secret.

Regards,

Lucy

Chapter 62

It was early January. Outside, there was a cold, driving rain. The clouds were dark, heavy—hanging low over the city. It eventually changed into a light snow, causing a wet slush in the streets.

Inside the house on Harley Street, Lucy built up a roaring fire in the fireplace. She used fragrant applewood, which gave off a sweet scent. She began to feel very cosy. She made sure that the tea was piping hot, and that the freshly-baked scones were kept warm underneath a lid.

When Dinah arrived, white flakes were caught in her black hair, and on her long lashes. A cloud formed around her face in the cold air. Lucy held the door open so Dinah could enter.

“Is your aunt here?” she asked.

“She’s out calling on her friend, who is sick,” Lucy explained. Aunt Joan had gone to Mrs Trent’s for tea. They were both very involved with charity work and had to discuss some sort of plans that they had.

“She’s too good for all of us,” Dinah said lovingly.

“Come and sit,” Lucy ordered. “I’ve got the tea-things ready.” Lucy was finally happy. She hadn’t seen Silas in many weeks, though she received letters from him often. They were romantic, though they

didn't force anything from Lucy. She was beginning to not be hurt. She could read them with a certain level of detachment. She wasn't sure how to read them. He seemed to want her to wait for him. Yet she was ready to feel healed.

The two friends sat. Dinah called on Lucy at least once a week, and their friendship was stronger than ever. Dinah said little of her brother, for which Lucy was thankful. Though, as she poured out cups of tea for them, she found herself curious to know how he fared.

"How is Silas doing?" Lucy asked as she spread some butter on her scone. The butter melted on the pastry, sinking into it. She took a bite —it was cinnamon, her favourite.

"He's been very focused of late," Dinah explained. "On his new role as viscount, and head of the household. He misses you, you know."

"He has said as much. In his letters." Lucy felt a tightening in the back of her throat. She took a bite of scone, but it felt dry in her mouth. She took a sip of tea, letting the hot drink seep into her tongue.

"I need to ask you for a favour, my dear Lucy," Dinah said.

"Anything." *Except to see Silas*.

"I need you to stop by my house tomorrow," Dinah told her. "It's very important that you come."

“But why?” Lucy’s hesitance was due to her sudden, overwhelming fear of encountering Silas. It was far too soon. She simply wasn’t ready. While she was able to regard him with detachment, the thought of seeing him was not a pleasant one.

She expected him to try and convince her to accept him back. That was something that Lucy was far from able to do.

“My wedding dress will be fitted tomorrow,” Dinah explained, beaming at her. “Since I have no mother and no other female blood-relations, I was hoping that you would come. You’re the closest to a real sister that I’ve ever had. Do say that you’ll come.”

Lucy smiled at her. Dinah was going to be married at the end of the month. “That is high praise indeed,” she said, feeling absolutely touched.

“Silas will be out,” Dinah assured her, as if she could read Lucy’s mind.

“The whole time?” Lucy asked. She knew that, someday, she would have to see him again. Certainly, at the wedding, if not before.

“The whole time. I’ll be sure of it,” Dinah confirmed.

“You’re going to tell him that I don’t want to see him?”

“No,” she said, waving her hand. “I’ll come up with something.

Michael will assist us, I'm sure of it. He's always able to talk Silas into going for drinks at their gentlemen's club."

"Very well," Lucy said, smiling brightly. "I'll be happy to come."

"Excellent." Dinah beamed. "I'm so ready to marry Reginald."

"I'm so happy that you're happy."

"Oh, Lucy," Dinah said, "I only wish that you could be so happy."

"I'm beginning to be," Lucy assured her.

And she was. After Silas' apology, she had begun to feel better. With time had come the knowledge that he had made a mistake, one that he was going to regret for a very long time.

"I'm glad," Dinah said. "But what do you plan to do?"

Lucy sighed. "I'm going to be like Aunt Joan," she said. "I'll have my good friends that I'll visit and write to. I'll have my painting and my books. It's going to be more than enough for me."

Lucy didn't know what to make of Silas' claims that he was going to prove his love to her. She was expecting it to come to nothing. She presumed that, perhaps, he hadn't come up with anything at all. It had

been such a long time since she'd seen him. No doubt, he had forgotten it.

"Well, I count myself blessed to be considered one of that number," Dinah said. "It's good to see you smiling almost as you used to."

"Yes," Lucy agreed with a sigh. "I'm not so sad about what Silas did anymore. I'm accustomed to being unmarried. I don't see how it would make me any happier than I am right now." She was even more used to expecting nothing from gentlemen. It was just how they were —unreliable.

"You'll have your painting and books," Dinah pointed out. "Though, won't you miss the idea of falling in love?"

"I doubt it," Lucy said. "All that love's brought me is heartache."

Dinah's brows knit together.

"Don't worry, dear Dinah," Lucy assured her. "I'm not embittered. I've just learned a very hard lesson, twice over."

Dinah smiled, taking a sip of her tea. She seemed to journey off, in her mind.

Lucy thought of all that she did have: a comfortable home, enough money to live on, and she had good female friends—Dinah, Susan, and she had Aunt Joan. They were all dearer to her than ever. They had

been there, throughout her heartbreak, and she knew that they would never allow her to be alone or want for anything.

Chapter 63

Silas had been waiting for Dinah to arrive home after her visit to Lucy. His pulse raced and he paced the parlour like a caged tiger, back and forth in front of the window overlooking the street.

Dinah had agreed to help him get Lucy to come over. She had been impressed by his plans to prove his love. She had taken pity on him, for Silas would never be able to convince Lucy to come over on his own.

It had been two long months of preparations. He had overseen all of the work, making sure that everything was perfect. He had written to Lucy, desperate to know her mind. It was difficult to tell from her letters. He had the feeling that she was holding back, politely responding to him yet not truly speaking her mind. He was desperate to know more. He missed her, achingly.

Dinah didn't tell him much after her weekly visits to Harley Street. She had made it clear that she would not ruin her friendship for his sake. Silas had been impressed with how little she told him about Lucy, despite his constant questioning. He hadn't gleaned a thing.

When he saw the carriage pull up outside, he raced downstairs in time for Mr Morton to open the door to allow Dinah inside.

"Well?" he asked, unable to bear the suspense any longer. "What did she say?"

His sister removed her bonnet and then her gloves, walking past him. “Mr Morton,” Dinah said, ignoring Silas for a moment, “please send some tea up to the parlour.”

“Yes, Miss Sweet.” The butler sketched a polite bow and disappeared down the hallway.

“Dinah?” Silas demanded impatiently as he followed her up the stairs. He couldn’t bear the suspense. If Lucy wasn’t able to come tomorrow, he didn’t know what he would do.

“She’s agreed to come,” Dinah replied over her shoulder as she walked up the staircase. “Though, she believes that you won’t be here. It was actually a condition of her coming here.”

He followed her up and into the parlour, where she sat down on the settee.

“Excellent,” he said, pacing back and forth. After all of his preparation and careful planning, it was finally ready: his proof that he loved Lucy. He knew that nothing could go wrong. Once she saw, then she would be sure of it.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Dinah said, as she watched him pace back and forth. She fixed him with a withering stare. “If I lose my friend over this, I will never forgive you. I’m already upset that I’ve lied to her.”

“Don’t worry,” Silas assured her. “She’s coming here! Nothing can go wrong! The moment she sees it, she’ll know how much I love her.” He turned to leave, to go and check on it again. The more that he looked, the more that he saw ways to improve it, even though it was already perfect.

When he turned towards the doorway, Michael stood there. He was studying Silas, his head tilted to the side.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” he asked.

“Yes. Absolutely,” he replied, stepping up to his brother. He placed his hands on his brother’s shoulders. “I love her, Michael. I am going to marry her.”

Michael smiled. Though there were dark circles underneath his eyes, his smile was genuine.

Silas laughed, cupping his brother’s cheeks with his palms. “We’ll all be married off, soon enough, brother.”

“Of course,” Michael replied, a larger grin crossing his face. Ever since the party here at the townhouse, Michael and Lady Rosemary Dunne had been close. Michael had recently been granted the formal permission to court her. Michael had seemed more upbeat of late. Silas clapped him on the back.

Everyone was in love, and nothing could go wrong.

Silas ran upstairs. There was nothing more left to be done. His project was complete. He had paid the workers the day before. It had taken longer than he'd wanted, but it looked perfect, down to the very last detail.

There was no going around it or doing things by half. He had to do a grand gesture, one that would prove to Lucy that he meant it. He loved her. More than life itself. He knew that when she saw it she would know, without a doubt, how much he loved her.

Chapter 64

Lucy arrived at the Sweets' town home in Mayfair just before nine of the clock in the morning. She had taken a hansom cab, so that the journey through the cold would only be fifteen minutes, rather than a half-hour walk. It was an expense that she could afford, particularly since she was acting as Dinah's sister that day.

She had dressed in her finest muslin—the spring green one. She wore her simple grey bonnet, with her dark cloak to keep her out of the chill air.

She stood on the sidewalk for a long moment, looking up at the familiar façade. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She was plagued by memories of the party that had been held there. That had been the last time that she and Silas had spent together, both of them in love.

Now, were they still? She ached for him. *No, it can never be*, she thought. *Not to mention, he's out. I'm not going to see him.*

She swallowed back her tears. She was here because Dinah needed her. Finally, she walked up the stairs, to the front door. When she reached the door, Mr Morton, the butler opened it for her.

"Miss Wilds," he said, stepping back to allow her inside. "Welcome. It's so good to see you. Miss Sweet is awaiting your arrival."

“It’s good to see you, as well, Mr Morton,” she replied courteously. She was excited for Dinah. Though Lucy certainly no longer believed in love herself, it was always nice to be around Dinah, who wholeheartedly believed in love. “I’m very excited to see Dinah’s dress.”

“I’m sure she is, too. Right this way,” he said, holding out an arm to direct her down the hallway.

Dinah was walking towards them, dressed in a plain grey muslin. She was beaming in excitement. “Lucy! I’m so glad that you’re here,” she said, taking Lucy by the arm. “I’ll take it from here, Mr Morton!” She began to lead Lucy down the hallway, linking her arm with Lucy’s. “Before we go upstairs to see my dress, there’s something else you absolutely *must* see.”

“What is it?” Lucy couldn’t think of a thing that she hadn’t seen of the townhouse. She was overwhelmed by the familiar sight of it. She glanced into the ballroom as they passed. Inside, light spilled through the windows, making it glow. Then, they were past it, walking down the hall where Lucy had met up with Silas so that he could kiss her.

She swallowed the painful lump in her throat, wishing that she wasn’t so strongly affected by being there. But she was. She was suddenly overwhelmed by how much she wanted Silas to suddenly appear. To beg her to take him back.

She would give in.

“A new wing has been added to the house,” Dinah explained. “It was only finished this week.”

“Why haven’t you mentioned it before?” Lucy asked.

“It was all Silas’ doing,” Dinah explained. “I wasn’t sure how much you would want to hear about his schemes.”

Dinah led her down the hallway. Where before there had been a window, there was now a sleek red door with a brass knob. Dinah turned the knob and pushed it open, and it swung soundlessly on its new hinges.

Lucy gasped as they entered the new wing, which was one large room filled with natural light streaming through the large windows, which had red velvet curtains. Overhead was a glass cupola, allowing sunlight to stream down over the whole room in bright swathes.

There were large wooden shelves, filled with books, from the floor all of the way to the ceiling. There was a ladder, with wheels, which would allow immediate access to every title. It was, in many ways, just like the lending library, but better.

Towards the other side of the room, there were empty shelves, ones which hadn’t yet been filled. It hinted that there was still work to be done—books to be chosen.

“Silas had it built for you,” Dinah said in a hushed voice. The reveal caused goose bumps to rise all over Lucy’s arms. Her heart rate rose and she reached up to wipe away her tears.

“I can hardly believe it,” she whispered. “It’s so beautiful.” Silas had built Lucy her very own library. It moved her to tears. All of the books—it had to have cost him a fortune. *I’m going to prove to you that I love you*—his words rang in her mind, as clear as a bell.

Suddenly, everything made sense. Why two months had passed, without anything more than letters. Why Dinah came to call on her at her home, instead of asking her over here. She hadn’t wanted to ruin the surprise.

That was when Silas stepped out from behind one of the shelves. The look that he gave her was one of pure love. Dinah touched Lucy gently on the arm, smiling before slipping away. Taking Lucy’s hands, Silas knelt before her, on the black and white tile floor. He felt so solid, his hands warm, with the familiar callouses ridging his palms.

Lucy beamed at him, through her tears. “You did this for me,” she said, squeezing his hands in her own.

“I never knew love until I met you,” he replied, squeezing back. He kept his blue-eyed gaze on hers, never once wavering. “I deeply regret the bet that I took part in. I will do anything to make it up to you.” He sighed before going on. “Know that I will never do anything that will hurt you,” he swore, shaking his head firmly. “Never again.”

Silas seemed genuine, but Lucy was cautious. She didn’t ever want to be hurt again. She tried to come up with the words to tell him that she was sorry, but she couldn’t. It was a library, in his home.

“Silas,” she began, steeling herself to tell him that she couldn’t. As much as she wanted this beautiful fairy tale, she couldn’t trust him. She couldn’t let him court her again. “I—”

“Let me finish?” he asked, softly.

“Sorry. Do go on.” After all, what could he possibly say that would change anything?

“Lucy Wilds, will you be my wife?” he asked. Lucy gasped, and he grinned up at her. “Enjoy this library with me, for the rest of our lives? There are still so many shelves that need to be filled. I left them for you, so that this library is wholly yours.”

She softened. He meant it. She knew that he did—she could see it in his eyes, gleaming back at her. He loved her, and he wanted to share his life with her.

“Yes,” she said, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. Silas beamed, standing up. He wiped away her tears with his thumbs, looking at her tenderly, and then he finally leaned in to kiss her.

His arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her in close to him. She wrapped her arms around him, holding onto him. She pulled away, looking around at her beautiful library.

“I can’t believe that you did this for me,” she said.

“Dinah mentioned that I needed to prove to you that I loved you,” he said. “Your aunt told me a while back that the way to your heart was through books. I listened to her.”

“She’s going to be so very happy.” Lucy was excited to return, to tell Aunt Joan everything. She would be overjoyed at the news.

“She already knows,” Silas assured her.

“She does?” Lucy was surprised. Aunt Joan was notorious for not keeping secrets, particularly when she was excited.

“Yesterday, when she said that she was visiting Mrs Trent,” he explained. “She came here, to call on me. I asked her for her permission,” he explained. “She happily gave it.”

Lucy smiled up at him. She loved him; she had never stopped loving him. She could see their life together, one filled with love and happiness.

Chapter 65

Lucy and Aunt Joan were dressed in their very best as they arrived at the Sweet residence for the engagement party that Dinah was hosting to celebrate Lucy and Silas. Aunt Joan was dressed in an elegant black bombazine, while Lucy wore her yellow silk dress. She was pleased to be wearing it again, along with a simple pearl pendant on a golden chain that was a gift from Silas. When Silas saw her, he seemed to melt.

Beaming, he took her hand, bowing over it and then kissing her knuckles. She could feel it through her glove, her cheeks heating up as she blushed.

“Welcome to your engagement party,” he murmured, his eyes seeming to drink in the sight of her. She wanted to remember him this way—the love that was in his eyes—forever. She wouldn’t have to—she would never be without him again.

“Welcome to yours, too.”

Dinah and Aunt Joan were deep in discussion; Aunt Joan was complimenting her on her pink silk gown, while Dinah was gushing over Aunt Joan’s. Silas used the moment to lean in and whisper in Lucy’s ear.

“I plan to sneak you out for a private moment, later.” His breath was warm against her cheek. Lucy felt a rush of anticipation. She looked him in the eyes.

“I can’t wait.” Her voice was a soft purr.

“I’m surprised at you, Miss Wilds.” He was clearly proud of her, his blue eyes sparkling. His lips quirked upwards in a devilish grin.

“You shouldn’t be, Lord Thornbridge.” She nudged his arm gently with her fingers. The feel of his hard bicep made her heart race.

“Come, come!” Dinah urged, waving for them to follow her. “Everyone’s waiting to see you.” The four of them walked up the stairs to the parlour.

Everyone was there—the three Sweet siblings, Susan, Violet, Rosemary, Levi, and Lord Browning, as well as several of the partygoers from Thornbridge Manor, like Lady Baldwin, all of whom were close friends to the Sweet family. Lucy found herself surrounded by loving, happy, familiar faces. She was smiling from ear to ear, so much that her cheeks ached.

She wasn’t used to being the centre of attention, yet she allowed herself to enjoy it. Everyone here loved her. Especially Silas, who never left her side for one moment. He placed her hand on his arm, then kept it there, trapped her arm beneath his own.

“If things go on like this, we shall never get out,” he whispered, clearly impatient to have her all to himself.

“It just so happens that this party is for us,” she replied with a laugh. She could see in his eyes what he planned, and the promise there was delicious. She loved it when they were alone. She craved his touch, his kisses. It had been far too long since their last private encounter.

The footmen brought in some champagne on silver trays. Dressed in dark coats, they looked like blackbirds moving in a V-formation, as though they were flying south for the winter.

“Everyone, take a glass!” Dinah ordered, clinking a fork against her own. “I want to say my toast!”

Once everyone had a glass of champagne, Dinah raised her glass. “I want to thank you all for coming to the little party that I’ve arranged this evening,” she said, turning towards Lucy and smiling at her. “I met Miss Lucy Wilds during this past summer, when she and her aunt came to the party that my father threw at Thornbridge Manor.”

Lucy beamed at her. She felt a lump forming in the back of her throat.

“From the moment that I met Lucy,” Dinah went on, “I had a good hunch that we would certainly get along. The very day that she arrived at Thornbridge Manor, we went for a walk in my mother’s garden, where I immediately found Lucy to be the very sort of person who I could be good friends with. She is intelligent and opinionated, with good taste in books.” Everyone laughed.

“And, she is one of the best and dearest ladies of my entire acquaintance. I had no idea that my brother thought the same thing, but I’m glad that he does. Lucy, I look forward to being your sister. Silas, you’ve certainly chosen well. Please join me in raising a glass to Lucy Wilds, and my brother Silas!” Dinah declared. “May you both

live a long, happy life together!”

“Hear, hear!” everyone agreed.

Lucy glanced over at Silas, who was grinning. They clinked their glasses, then sipped. The champagne was cold and crisp, with a sweet, bubbly taste. She hadn’t much experience with champagne, but she knew that Dinah had splurged on this party. Silas had been happy to give her free rein on his bank account to fund it.

Dinah made sure things moved on quickly. Everyone was given a short while to greet each other and to talk, while sipping their drinks. Not long after, the gong for dinner was rung and they all went into the dining room. Lucy was pleased to find that she was seated between Dinah and Silas. Aunt Joan sat on Silas’ other side. The dinner was a full six courses, and Dinah’s excellent planning skills were on full display.

There was roast pheasant, with a cranberry glaze, and roast potatoes in butter and rosemary. This was prefaced by a white soup, braised scallops, and fresh salmon, and was followed by a very good chocolate cake with blackberry sauce.

Everyone enjoyed it immensely and ate until they were absolutely stuffed. Afterward, the group retired to the parlour, where coffee and brandy were served. Lucy observed everyone. She felt pleasantly full and warm. The room had a soft glow as the candles flickered, spreading light over all of Lucy’s friends and loved ones.

Susan and Dinah were in a very lively discussion with Lady Violet and Lady Rosemary. Lucy knew that all of them were going to be good friends, bound by lively and intelligent discussion. Lucy was proud to

count herself among their number.

Michael and Levi and Lord Browning and Aunt Joan arranged for a card game to be started. Lucy could sense Silas looking for the opportunity to slip from the room. She glanced over at him and smiled.

Chapter 66

This was the moment that he had been waiting for all evening. No one was paying either of them any mind. The combination of steadily flowing alcohol and plentiful, rich food made everyone less attentive, so it was the perfect time for Silas and Lucy to disappear for a little while.

"Come," he said to her in a low voice. "They won't notice that we've slipped off. Not when they're so engaged in their card game."

They were—everyone was gathered around the card-tables, interested in their full hands. Others were gathered at the pianoforte, and the ladies had begun to have a little concert. It seemed that no one had noticed that Lucy and Silas were not among their number.

She smiled at him, her eyes seething with passion. It caused a flutter in his stomach. He hungered for her, and her alone. There would never be anyone else for him, as long as he lived. He found himself to be content. He knew that he was lucky to have her, having nearly lost her entirely.

Hand in hand, they slipped from the room. They waited in the hallway for a moment to see if anyone missed them. A few minutes passed, with no one coming to search for them. Satisfied, he took her hand and led her to the library that he had built for her. He watched as she looked around at all of the books, smiling blissfully.

He wanted to make sure that she was always this happy. The evening

had been a success, thanks to Dinah's expert planning and Silas' large bank account.

"Are you happy?" he asked. If she asked anything of him, he would gladly give it to her.

"I'm very happy," she said, sighing, though her brows knit together and she looked troubled. "There's something that I haven't told you, and I feel that you should know."

He felt a little worried, but he nodded. If it was something that concerned her, then he wanted to help her through it. "Tell me," he told her, willing to accept anything that she needed to say. "There should be no secrets between us. You know about all of my past dalliances."

She laughed. "I do, at that." He had told her everything—all about his philandering, so that she was never blindsided again. After all, any of his old flames might show up and want to take revenge on him for whatever imagined slights. He wanted Lucy to be prepared for this.

He had been sure to tell her, over and over again—in falling in love with her, Silas would always be true to Lucy. No other woman could tempt him ever again. He had sworn it and meant it.

He raised her hand to his lips. "Tell me," he said, gently. Whatever it was, he could see that it weighed on her. She seemed to gather her thoughts, taking in a deep breath and then letting it out. She folded her hands in front of her.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever told you about the man that I was planning on marrying, back when I was eighteen.” She looked over at him.

“No, you have not,” he replied. “Dinah mentioned that you had been hurt before, but she didn’t tell me any of the specifics.”

She began to pace slowly past the shelves, running her fingertip along the leather spines of the books.

“His name was Edward Russ,” she began.

Silas knew of the man, but he kept silent. He wanted her to unburden her soul so that they could both turn their focus to their future, and what they both wanted.

“He wanted for us to keep our courtship a secret,” she went on. “I cared for him, and I believed him when he said that he loved me and wanted nothing more than to marry me. He broke it off not long after and then married another, a woman who would have more money.”

“What an insolent bird-wit.” Silas, should he ever run into this Edward Russ, would make sure that he knew just how low of an individual he was. He was angry, for Lucy’s sake.

“It was years before I could ever consider letting another person in, not until you.” Lucy turned towards him.

He was glad that she had. For if she hadn’t, then maybe he would

have never met her. She would have been married before she'd ever come to Thornbridge Manor. And that was something that Silas could never have borne.

"You were meant to be free to meet me," he said, taking her hands in his. Their story had not always been an easy one, but it certainly was one that looked like it was going to end happily.

"I hate that I let my heart grow so cold after one bad experience, and I'm so grateful to you for never giving up on me," she told him, her eyes shining with love. "Thank you for showing me what real love is."

He smiled, touched by her words. "I should really thank him," he said. "Or you wouldn't have been available by the time we met."

"You're horrible sometimes," she teased, though she shuddered. "Being married to him wouldn't have been a good life at all. I certainly would have suffered. Especially when it turned out that he only wanted my money."

"You know, I've heard of Edward Russ," he commented. "Though I don't know him personally." He reached up, caressing her cheek with his fingertips. She leaned into his touch, her eyes on his as he ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

"From what I've heard, however," he went on, "he was caught having an affair with his wife's sister. His father-in-law, though very ill almost unto death, kicked him out of the family home. The last I heard, he was penniless and staying with relatives."

Oddly enough, he had heard about Edward Russ from none other than Percy Stalton. Percy had mentioned him in passing sometime the previous summer. The two of them went gambling together, as Silas recalled. It seemed rather apt that they were friends. They both deserved one another's company. They were selfish and mean—out to take advantage of others.

"I cannot take any pleasure in someone else's pain," Lucy said thoughtfully. "But I have to admit that it sounds like Edward has made his own bed and is now lying in it, for better or for worse."

"That's very damning, coming from you." He smiled, proud of her.

"I suppose it is." She nodded slowly.

He leaned in, brushing his lips against hers. The kiss was searching, after all, they hadn't been able to be alone in a while. They were always chaperoned by either Dinah or Aunt Joan. He placed his hand on her lower back, pulling her closer to his body. He loved feeling her softness—her gently rounding hips. The kiss deepened, and he heard her moan softly.

He felt himself harden in response. He leaned in, so that his lips were beside her ear. "Lucy, darling," he whispered. "Will you let me make love to you?"

"Right here?" she asked, raising her eyebrow.

He leaned back, so he could look her in the eyes. For a moment, she looked worried. "Right here," he told her.

“It will be only you, for the rest of my life,” he promised her. “And, I may know ways of pleasuring a woman without getting her pregnant.”

“Do you?” she asked curiously.

“I do.” He moved closer and whispered in her ear, telling her exactly what he planned to do to her. He saw her blush bright crimson. When he was done, he looked her in the eye. Hunger awoke in her gaze. He raised his eyebrows and she nodded. He kissed her, once, quickly.

Chapter 67

As Silas locked the door to the library, Lucy listened to the sound of his booted feet clicking across the floor. The loud click of the lock, sliding into place. She suddenly realized that he had put the lock there on purpose. She felt hyperaware of his every move.

Her heart beat fast. Arousal was pooling between her legs. She wanted this. Though she hadn't known that they were going to go so far, she felt ready.

"I don't believe they've missed us yet," he said, standing behind her and wrapping his arms around her. She leaned back into him, her body melting up against his.

"No," she agreed. "They were rather into their game of cards."

Lucy turned towards him. He kissed her, then laid her down on the dark velvet-upholstered chaise. She let him guide her. She was unsure of herself, a little nervous, if she was being honest. He slipped her skirts up over her hips.

He moved smoothly, clearly knowing what he was doing, had done so many times before. Parting her legs, he used his tongue to pleasure her. Lucy leaned her head back against the chaise. It took her a moment, but she relaxed into it. She was suffused with warmth. It was like nervous butterflies, but better.

She could feel herself being wound up by the lapping of his tongue. She moaned, wrapping her fingers in his hair. This was the most intoxicating and erotic experience of her life so far. She embraced it, allowing Silas to have his way with her.

“God, you’re perfect,” he said, pausing.

“How do you know to do that?” she asked, looking down at where he had positioned himself between her legs.

“Practice, my dear.” He moved his fingers in and out, teasing her in just the right places. She could feel his gaze on her—she felt the most attractive that she’d ever felt. She lay back, her back arching as she was wracked on the stormy sea of her own pleasure being sated.

Silas alternated using his tongue and his fingers, stirring her up until she was crying out. She covered her mouth with her hand to muffle her cries, suddenly worried that someone might come looking for them and overhear.

He reached up, pulling her hand away. They grinned at each other and then he began again, until finally, Lucy felt as though she had nothing left. He got up onto the chaise beside her and she sagged against him. Satiated, she found herself staring up at the glass dome. It was filled with the utter black of the night sky. She could see the stars, so cold and small.

Silas curled his body around hers. She turned towards him, kissing him. She felt closer to him than ever before. Sometimes, she worried she wouldn’t be enough for him, particularly when she’d heard how many women he’d been with.

“Did I do well?” she asked.

“You did perfectly,” he told her, looking at her tenderly. “You know, I’ve never had sex with someone that I’ve been in love with. It’s far better than any other sex there is.”

“Was that sex?” she asked.

“Of a kind,” he replied.

She smiled at him, then gasped. “We should get back to them. They’ll be looking for us at any minute.”

They both stood up from the chaise, and he helped her to get her dress straightened.

“They’ll all know,” she hissed. When she put her hands to her cheeks, she could feel that they were still burning. Lucy had never felt scandalous before. And she had never gone as far as she had that night. But she trusted Silas.

“Chances are, they haven’t even missed us,” he remarked. “Between the champagne and cards, they’ll all be quite wrapped up.”

They returned to the party, both gripping the other’s hand. Lucy’s

cheeks were bright red, flushed from Silas' exertions. No one had noticed that they had been gone. No one at all. He handed her a glass of champagne. She accepted it, clinking it against his. Then, they both sipped their drinks in silence, the weight of what they had just done stretching deliciously between them.

She stood on the edge of the gathering, looking around among everyone there. Aunt Joan was exclaiming excitedly and her cheeks were pink. Beside her, she had a glass of champagne.

"I won!" her aunt declared, and everyone clapped.

Even those at the pianoforte had gathered around the table.

Lucy's heart felt so full. She had never known such joy. For though she was no longer virtuous, she knew that Silas would stop at nothing to marry her. She was in love, and that was what people in love did—they trusted one another. Their eyes met. Silas beamed at her, his eyes softening. She felt her heart do a happy flip.

The card game ended not long after. The players all went their separate ways, most of them to the refreshments table that had been set up. Dinah came over to Lucy.

"They were wondering where you went," she said. Lucy, horrified, blinked at her.

“Not to worry,” she assured her. “Reginald and I slip off sometimes,” she admitted. “When you’re engaged, it’s permitted, even though everyone says it isn’t.” She patted Lucy on the arm.

The champagne was flowing through Lucy’s veins. Now that she knew carnal affection, she was hungry for more. She couldn’t believe that it would be months before her wedding to Silas.

Aunt Joan went home early, but Lucy stayed to say goodbye to all of their guests. Once they had gone, Silas accompanied her to her house in the Sweets’ carriage.

He pulled the curtains so they could have privacy. He kissed her, his fingertips playing over the outside of Lucy’s thigh.

“I was wondering if you might accompany me to the lending library tomorrow,” he said.

“Of course.” She loved the library, even though she now had one of her own.

“Good.” It felt like they were in their own little world, where no one else existed. She wanted to get lost there and never return. The carriage pulled up in front of the house on Harley Street, and Silas helped her out.

He walked her to the door, then bowed low before kissing her on the hand. He leaned in to whisper in her ear, “I won’t be able to stop thinking of tonight.”

He gave her a significant look, and her pulse raced as she smiled at him. “So will I.”

They shared one last gaze. Then, Silas turned back toward the carriage. She unlocked the door and went inside. It was true—she would be going over what they had done in the library until the next time that they found a moment to slip away again.

“I’m glad that you’re home.” Aunt Joan was in her dressing gown, her long hair streaked with grey hung loose over her shoulders.

“Good evening, Aunt Joan.” She hoped her aunt couldn’t read her thoughts, though at times it certainly felt as if she could.

“Are you happy, Lucy?”

“Yes, Aunt Joan.”

“I’m glad. I wish that your parents were here to see this. They would be so happy. His parents, as well.”

“You’re here,” she said. “I am happy that you’re here.”

“As am I, my dear. It won’t just be the two of us anymore.” Tears sparkled in Aunt Joan’s eyes.

“No,” Lucy agreed, swallowing back her own tears. “We’ll have a whole family. With Silas, and Dinah, and Michael.”

“All good things from here on out,” Aunt Joan said. “It will be very quiet, here on Harley Street, with you gone.”

A bigger lump formed in the back of Lucy’s throat. “Surely, you’ll come out to the countryside, Aunt Joan.”

Aunt Joan took both of her hands in hers. “Of course, I will. But you will be newly married and not want me around. I have my friends here. They can’t do without me.”

Lucy nodded. “I don’t think I’ll be able to do without you.” She had been hoping her aunt might be persuaded to live with them year-round.

“Things change, Lucy. They change for the better. We must keep moving forward, taking happiness where we can.”

“You said that you regretted not marrying.” Lucy knew it wasn’t her fault that her aunt had never married, but she couldn’t help but feel that if Aunt Joan hadn’t been so busy caring for her, then she might have been better able to find a husband.

“Certainly. But I love the life that I have. It’s a good one.” She winked at Lucy. “Now—I’ve not had so much champagne since Amelia and I

were young and at Thornbridge Manor. It's gone to my head and made me quite sleepy!"

"Goodnight, Aunt Joan."

"Goodnight, my dear Lucy." Her aunt smiled at her, then pulled her into a hug. Lucy hugged her back. Aunt Joan patted her on the cheek, then turned and walked upstairs.

She waited in the little foyer as her aunt's footsteps travelled up to her room followed by the soft sound of the door, opening and closing. Then, Lucy went to her own room, closing the door after her.

She struck a match, lighting her candle, then went to the fireplace, where she lit the logs that she'd placed there earlier. She sat down on the floor in front of the fire, letting it warm her.

Lucy wrapped her arms around herself as she sat, thinking back over the evening. She was sad that she would be leaving her and Aunt Joan's little world on Harley Street. But she knew, too—she was marrying the love of her life, something that she would never regret.

She thought of Silas, and how he loved her. She thought of what had happened in the library that evening. She was full of joy and love. Her veins sang with it, and her skin tingled at the thought of Silas' touch.

Finally, she stood up and began to undress, imagining as she did that it was his fingers undoing her clothes and slowly removing them. She imagined his gaze on her, cherishing her, worshipping her.

Chapter 68

The very next day, Silas and Lucy returned to the lending library, as they had planned. Aunt Joan had gone to visit her good friend, Mrs Scriven, who had recently been ill. Aunt Joan was bringing her soup and freshly-baked bread.

When they arrived at the library, Lucy looked around. She was amazed by how many details from this building had been employed in the library that Silas had built.

“Did you bring the builder here?” she asked.

“I did. I told him to make an almost exact replica,” he replied, clearly proud of himself.

“He did an excellent job of it,” she mused. “Down to the way that the sun falls through the glass dome.”

“Just think, we won’t have to come here anymore,” he commented.

“Oh, but I want to!” she said, turning to him. “It’s all very well to have a library of one’s own, but to make a visit to the lending library is a joy like no other.”

“Very well,” he replied, smiling. “If you love it so much, I will keep my subscription. We shall come here as often as you like.”

“Oh, please do. You spoil me.”

“That’s all by plan,” he replied. “I want you to be the happiest lady in all of England.”

She couldn’t argue with him, though she already knew herself to be incandescently happy. “You don’t have to work so hard at it,” she assured him.

She suddenly recalled the slip that had been in Silas’ pocket the last time they had come. “Did you ever get a chance to check what was at those coordinates that you had in your pocket?” He had gone to the countryside, all those months ago, and she wondered if he had found anything.

“I did, actually. That was my primary reason for going to the country. Though, once I’d arrived, it was too late.”

“Someone else had taken it?” she asked in dismay.

“Whatever it was, it was gone,” he replied. “Someone had been there and had dug it up. I checked in the dirt to see if there was anything, but I found nothing at all.”

“Curious.” Her mind kicked into high gear. Her gut was telling her

that something was suspect about that, though she couldn't put her finger on what it was.

"Even if my father did bury something there," he went on, "it appears that someone else knew about it and took it."

Lucy felt unsettled. Frowning, she turned towards him. "Think hard," she said. "Did anyone have access to your father's books and papers? Someone who wouldn't normally, perhaps?"

He thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head. "No, no one."

They began to walk on. Something about all of this was bothering Lucy. She knew that it would continue to plague her until she'd solved the matter. She was about to ask Silas if, perhaps, one of the servants might have come upon it when Silas gasped.

"Wait a moment. There was someone."

"Who?" she asked.

"The weekend of the house party, I caught Percy coming out of my father's study."

Lucy nodded; suddenly, things clicked into place. Naturally, Mr Percy Stalton would be the guilty party. He was mean, sneaky. If anyone had stolen the coordinates and cheated on the treasure hunt, it would have been him.

“I should have checked his pockets,” he hissed. “Had him turn them out, right that moment.”

“What are you going to do?” Lucy asked. They had to do something. Already, months had gone by. Percy could have done anything with whatever the viscount had buried. It might even be long gone by then —sold to pay off his gambling debts, which Lucy had heard were many.

“I’m going to leave you back at your home, and then I’m going to go and confront him.”

“Is that wise? Should you go alone? Let me come with you.” Lucy was disappointed that he didn’t want to take her. She was fully ready to go in for the fight with him.

“I should be fine,” he reasoned. “Percy’s a crooked chap, but he isn’t a killer.” He looked at her. “Besides, I don’t want him anywhere near you.”

Lucy nodded, knowing that she would be waiting for him to let her know that all had gone well.

“You’ll come straight back to Harley Street when you’re done, won’t you?” she asked. “I’ll be worried sick the whole time.”

“Of course,” he replied. “Unless I have to go and get the constable.

Either way, you'll have word from me before the day is over."

They both left, walking quickly. Silas was clearly worried. He was silent for most of the walk back, and Lucy allowed him to gather his thoughts. He was going to have to approach Mr Stalton with a high level of tact, in order to get back whatever Percy had taken.

Chapter 69

After leaving Lucy at her home, Silas hired a hansom cab and went immediately to the home of Percy's father, out in Kensington. While Percy was paying off his debts, he was staying with his parents. From what Michael had told him, Percy had been working hard. However, perhaps Percy wasn't working at all. What if he had sold whatever Silas' father had buried to pay off his debts? Depending upon what it was, Percy might not have had to work at all.

The thought made Silas sick to his stomach. Whatever Josiah Sweet had hidden, it was his last gift to his children. It should have stayed in the family, as he had likely intended. Instead, Percy had been looking out for himself. As he always seemed to do. It only made Silas even angrier.

The cab came to a stop just outside of Mr Stalton's house. It was a nice house, with white siding and dark shutters. The door was painted a bright cherry red and there was a brass knocker on it, in the shape of a lion's head.

Silas stared up at it, calming himself before travelling up the flight of granite steps. There would be no use going in angry. He needed to approach Percy calmly. He would get him comfortable, then Silas would ask about the coordinates. Steeling himself, he walked up the steps and knocked.

"Lord Thornbridge!" the butler exclaimed when he saw him. "It has been a very long while, indeed."

“It has,” Silas agreed. “Are the Staltons at home?” Even if Percy wasn’t there, he planned to give a full account of how things seemed to his father. The elder Mr Stalton was an honourable man who would ensure that Silas got back whatever it was that Percy had taken.

“Neither Mr Stalton nor his parents are at home, My Lord,” the butler said, to Silas’s disappointment. “However, we expect them back at any moment. If you’d like to wait for him in the study, I’m sure that would be fine, since you are a particular friend of Mr Stalton.”

“Thank you,” Silas said, finding that luck was on his side. Clearly, Percy hadn’t told anyone that he was no longer on friendly terms with Silas. Not to mention, he was about to be left alone in Percy’s study—where his former friend was most likely to hide something.

Silas was shown into the study, where the butler poured him a glass of brandy and then left him to his own recognizance. Silas waited until the butler’s footsteps vanished down the hall, then used the opportunity to go through Percy’s desk.

Setting his glass of brandy aside, he took everything out of the middle drawer, looking for a catch of some sort. Finding nothing, he put everything back. He then began to search through the ledgers that were piled on the desk, leafing through to see if there were any papers hidden in them. He tipped each book onto its side, pages down, then shook. Several papers fell out.

Silas perused them, finding them all to be in Percy’s hand. From the looks of it, Percy was not done with gambling, and had placed new bets as recently as the day before. Silas stuck them all back in the top ledger. Percy’s gambling wasn’t any of Silas’ concern. Then he recalled his brother, and how much Michael had put into helping Percy to get back on his feet. He reconsidered, pulling them out and placing them

in the pocket of his own jacket. Michael would need to see, in order to extricate himself from Percy's clutches.

He then turned towards another desk drawer. Inside, he found several fresh quills and pots of expensive inks, but no papers. He tried the bottom of the drawer, looking for a catch. Again, no such luck. He opened the third drawer. Inside, there was a strongbox. It was heavy. Silas peered at it. Whatever was inside moved with a clunk.

He set it on top of the desk. He wasn't about to break into it. Not when he wasn't sure that it had anything to do with his father's buried treasure. Although, he considered it. The box didn't look like it had been buried in the ground at all. It was smooth metal, with intricate workings in swirls.

No, he thought. *Father wouldn't have buried something like that.*

When he was a child, his father had used wooden boxes, which he had made by hand. They were of cedar, with expert dovetailing at the corners. Silas recalled the sharp, but familiar scent of them.

No, Percy wouldn't have kept it.

He turned his attention to the bottom of the drawer. Percy had always been so interested in false bottoms, and hiding things. He had gone on about them for hours, when intoxicated. Silas had a hunch that he had at least one. Sure enough, when he knocked on the bottom of the drawer, it made a hollow thunk, indicating that there was a space there. He then ran his fingers over the drawer's bottom.

Finally, he found the catch. The false bottom opened to reveal a space lined in green velvet. He lifted it up and there, he found the same coordinates that had been in with his father's things, scribbled hastily in Percy's handwriting. This was damning. Not to mention, he found several stacks of bank notes. It seemed that Percy was up to something.

He blanched at the sight of the banknotes—was this windfall the result of the sale of his father's treasure? He felt sick to his stomach, for it seemed to be the case.

Silas wondered—did Percy copy them down after finding them in the country study, and then go and get whatever was buried there? If so, where was the box? What had he done with it?

Silas put everything except for the coordinates back where he had found it, and then sat down in the armchair with the glass of brandy. He settled in to wait, coming up with his plan of attack as he stared into the flames which crackled in the grate.

All of the Staltons came to see Silas when they finally arrived home. They all smiled at him, though Percy looked somewhat on edge. He stared at Silas curiously. Silas grinned at him, watching as the smile fell from Percy's lips. He'd had enough time to compose himself, while drinking the very good brandy. He felt as relaxed as a well-fed tiger.

"Lord Thornbridge! How good of you to come and visit us!" Percy's father said. "It has been a very long time since I last saw you."

“Indeed,” Silas agreed, though neither of them mentioned that it had been at his father’s funeral. “I actually came to ask Percy a question.”

“Then we shall retire to the parlour.”

“No, do stay. I think you need to hear this as well.”

Silas turned his gaze to Percy, who was like a rat caught in a trap. His eyes panicked, but his lips quirked upward in a cool grin.

“I can’t think of a thing that you would need from me,” he said, shrugging. “It was my understanding that we are no longer friends, Silas. As per your own admission and lack of care to my… recent difficulties.”

Silas wasn’t put off by Percy’s cold accusation. He laughed, and then

Silas held up the paper with the coordinates. Percy went pale, his eyes widening in first anger, then fake shock. He recovered quickly, however.

“What is that?”

“This is your handwriting,” Silas said. “Is it not?”

Percy merely shrugged. He folded his arms, clearly trying to figure a way to worm himself free of this situation. Both Mr and Mrs Stalton were looking curiously back and forth between their son and Silas.

Mr Stalton put on his spectacles, squinting at the paper. “That is certainly your hand, my son. Where did you find it, Lord Thornbridge?”

“I found these coordinates in your desk, Percy,” Silas said. “I also found the same coordinates among my father’s things after he died.” He waited for a moment. Percy said nothing. “When I went to the place, I found it all dug up. Whatever was buried there has been taken by someone else. Someone who had gotten the coordinates from my father’s study.”

“I couldn’t think who—” Percy began, still continuing the weak farce. Silas cut him off. He had no time to suffer fools.

“I found this in your desk. Not to mention, I definitely recall running into you leaving my father’s study the weekend of the party. You claimed that you were looking for a pen and ink, however, I believe that you stole these coordinates from his things.”

When Silas glanced over at Percy’s parents, they both looked exhausted. He knew that he would soon find assistance from their quarter.

“You lie,” Percy hissed. “I would never—”

“Percy!” his father thundered. “What did you do?”

“Nothing, Father! Silas has had it out for me for a very long time,” he claimed. “He thinks that because he’s viscount that he’s better than me and can accuse me of stealing when it suits his needs.”

“Percy!” His father’s look of stern disapproval stopped Percy in his tracks. “Do the right thing, for once in your life, my son. Don’t make it worse, when Lord Thornbridge clearly has hard evidence proving that it was you. Or, so help me God, I will disown you and call the constables myself. Then they can get to the bottom of things.”

“Disown me?” Percy’s eyes widened. Clearly this was the one thing that would have gotten the truth out of him. He swallowed, his gaze slipping to the floor. Silas waited.

“Yes, I will disown you.” His father shot him a glare that spoke to just how fast he would have it done. Mr Stalton was one of London’s best businessmen. He was known for his decisive actions and killer instincts.

Percy seemed to deflate almost instantly.

“Very well. I dug at the coordinates,” he admitted. “I unearthed a small wooden box, which contained the deed to land and a house near Thornbridge Manor, along with a letter saying that the land now belongs to whomever had won the treasure hunt.” He shifted awkwardly. “It had the late viscount’s signature on it. It was also addressed to you, Silas.”

“What did you plan to do with it?” Silas asked. “Pay off your debts?”

To his surprise, Percy shook his head.

“I was going to take it for my own. I was going to go there, live off the land. Start over and live a life that actually meant something.”

“When were you going to go?” Silas’ mouth had gone dry. It had been several months, for Percy to have already done this. Silas was so many steps behind.

“I haven’t had it notarized yet,” Percy admitted. “I’m not the legal owner.”

“You will return the deed to Lord Thornbridge,” his father ordered.

“I found it!” Percy snapped. “It’s mine.”

“You took the coordinates,” his mother pointed out. “You didn’t find it in a fair manner.”

“Mother.” Percy seemed to deflate even more. All of the fight went out of him as he stood there, with both of his parents giving him looks of disappointment.

Percy scowled, then stalked over to the bookcase. He pulled out a large leather tome and opened it up, pulling out a folded paper from

its pages.

“Thank you,” Silas said, bowing to all three Staltons.

“You’re certainly welcome. We apologize for not being able to do anything about it sooner. If I had known, I certainly would have made him return it,” Mr Stalton said, glowering at his wayward progeny. “We’ll talk later, Percy.” Both Mr and Mrs Stalton left, both of them walking towards the parlour and leaving Silas and Percy alone.

“I’m sorry, Silas,” Percy said. “I just wanted something for my own. I’m tired of struggling.”

“You make it very difficult to sympathize, given what you said to Lucy. She was very hurt by it. I don’t care that you were trying to hurt me. But you hurt her most grievously, and for that, I can never forgive you.”

“I’m sorry for that, as well. I know that you planned to marry her. Now, at least, you’re free of that burden.”

“I’m going to marry her. We’ve cleared things between us.”

Percy frowned. “I thought she was the very last woman you would think to marry.”

“That was a lie,” Silas admitted freely. “So that you would leave her alone. Lucy has always been mine. I love her, and even your acid

words cannot keep us apart."

Percy eyed him as though he didn't know who he was. Clearly, the Silas that he had thought existed wasn't true. For that, Silas was glad. "Congratulations," Percy mumbled.

"Thank you. Now, I must be off." He walked down to the front door, which the butler opened to let him out. Silas turned back to the stairs. Percy stood at the top.

"I doubt I'll see you again soon," Silas said.

"Probably for the best," Percy replied.

Silas walked back towards Lucy's home, giving himself time to think. Right before his father died, he had been talking about the treasure hunts from when they were children. It had been during luncheon, right before Percy had arrived.

His father had just mentioned it, when he was interrupted. Then, they had all been so busy. And then, the letter, telling him about the fire. And then, he had been killed. A chain of events leading to here, now.

He stopped at the Harley Street Park, sitting down on a bench where he could look over the documents he had retrieved from Percy.

Silas took it out, opening the letter.

Dear Silas, it read. *I had hoped to drop clues for you so that you, and only you, would be able to find this. I know that someday, you will receive Thornbridge Manor. However, I have had a house built for you on land nearby. It is my hope that when you have incentive to marry, it would change your mind on settling down.*

Oak Ridge needs a mistress, as well as children to fill all of its rooms. It is on good land, which you can do with as you please.

I want for you to take life seriously. To not waste it with fleeting things, but to dig deep and to love with your whole heart. Life is short. You only have so many years before you're an old man. I want for you to find and experience love like I had with your mother. I want for you to be happy, my son. The years that I had with Amelia were some of the best, and I wouldn't change that for all of the riches in the world.

All my love,

Your Father

The letter blurred as Silas' eyes filled with tears. Here was his father's last letter to him, made all the more poignant because Silas *had* found love, just as his father had hoped. He knew that his father would have approved of Lucy, wholeheartedly.

He sat there, in tears. Finally, he wiped them away. He was going to

Lucy's so that she could stop worrying about him. She needed to see this letter.

Silas was now the owner of two houses. He wanted Lucy's opinion on what to do with one of them. He had a plan, but now all of his decisions needed to be made with her. If they were to wed, then they needed to work as a team.

He thought, though, that she would happily agree with his plan.

Chapter 70

After Silas had spoken with Lucy, he returned home, where he found Michael in the parlour. The two brothers poured themselves glasses of wine, and Silas told Michael everything that had transpired in the warmth of the room. Meanwhile, Michael sat silently and listened, his eyes widening in surprise.

"I—I treated him like a friend," Michael said. "I vouched for him, and I got him a job. Loaned him money. And he stole from us—from Father." He rubbed his temple, then took a long sip from his wine.

Silas nodded, though he said nothing. He had never seen Michael so upset before. He waited, letting his brother absorb this new information, and let his gaze go to the fire. He felt warm and cosy. More than that, he was relieved at how things had gone. Things could have ultimately been much worse—if Percy had already taken possession of the house and sold it.

Michael laughed, covering his mouth with his hand. He still held the letter from their father in his hand. Silas was worried that he was getting hysterical.

"Well," Michael said. "It's good to know that in his last days Father was thinking of you. Of the future." He lowered his hand. "He clearly expected to live for at least thirty years more."

"Yes." Silas couldn't agree more. "I think he was also thinking of you. For if he bought me a house, then I wouldn't need Thornbridge

Manor."

Silas suspected that this was what his father intended. He was always looking out for the fair thing to do. Silas hoped that he was right.

Michael's brows creased. "What are you saying? Of course, you were to receive Thornbridge Manor. The Viscount of Thornbridge gets the estate of Thornbridge."

"I believe that, because I received the title, you were to receive the house. But father didn't get a chance to amend the will."

"He didn't, and we don't know that."

"No, we don't. In any case," Silas said, pausing to take a sip of his drink, "I've spoken with Lucy, and she agrees. We would both like for you to have Thornbridge Manor."

"It goes with the title." Michael shook his head. "I will—I will build a house. A small one, as we planned."

"If Thornbridge Manor belongs to you, then it stays in the family, and you should have it. I want for you and Lady Rosemary to be happy and comfortable.

"Besides, living there makes me sad. It reminds me too much of Mother and Father. I want a fresh start, and Lucy agrees."

“Even though you’ve never seen this new manor?”

“Even so.”

Michael was silent for a moment. Silas could see tears in his brother’s eyes.

“Thank you, Silas. You’re a good brother, and a just gentleman.”

“You do so much for the family,” Silas pointed out. “I don’t see why you shouldn’t have things of your own.”

“When will you go and see it?” Michael asked.

“This weekend,” Silas replied. “I want to have all of this settled before Dinah’s wedding.”

“To think,” Michael mused. “All three of us, about to be happily married.”

“Mother and Father would have been so pleased.”

They both clinked their glasses, then sipped. They sat together in silence, thinking happy thoughts. Silas was content. It seemed that,

after everything that had come to pass, there was going to be a good ending for everyone.

Chapter 71

It was nearing the date of Dinah's wedding to Lord Browning. The day before the wedding, Lucy hosted a party at the house on Harley Street. She invited all of her and Dinah's close friends—Susan, Violet, and Rosemary. For the little townhouse, it would be a very large party, indeed. The largest since the days of Lucy's parents.

She had done a thorough clean herself, going to the flower stall down the street to purchase bundles of flowers to make a few strategic arrangements to decorate the space. She had also prepared a large selection of small finger sandwiches, tea cakes, and other delicious treats. It would be a simple tea, but with good friends and excellent discussion.

"How are the preparations coming?" Aunt Joan asked, peering into the kitchen.

"They are going well," Lucy said, wiping her hands on her apron. She had on her striped muslin, and was just finishing putting the watercress and cucumber sandwiches together.

When she turned to look at her aunt, she was surprised to find that she was dressed to go out, with her cloak and bonnet on. In her hand, she held her gloves and reticule.

"Aunt Joan?" she asked. "Will you stay for the party?"

“Oh, no. I want you to all have fun. You don’t need an old woman hanging about.” Aunt Joan waved her hand.

“Oh, but we’d love to have you here.” It was true—Lucy had counted on her staying.

“I have plans to go and visit Mrs Trent. She’s feeling under the weather, as you know.”

“I do.”

Aunt Joan touched Lucy’s cheek. “Tell Dinah that I’m so happy for her.”

“I will.”

Aunt Joan bustled out of the house. Lucy glanced around. She knew that her time there was coming to an end. Aunt Joan planned to continue living there, after Lucy’s marriage.

It made Lucy sad, in a bittersweet way. For so long, it had just been Lucy and Aunt Joan. Now, though, Lucy was getting a larger family. And soon, children. For she and Silas were both in agreement—they wanted to have as many as possible.

She stood in the kitchen, surrounded by plates of sandwiches and cakes, and one tear slipped down her cheek. Quickly, she brushed it

away and went to fetch water for tea from the pump out back.

The party for Dinah was a joyous event. The young women all sat on the settee and armchairs, with cups of tea and platefuls of cake and sandwiches. The floral arrangements had been declared tasteful, and then the conversation had turned to books and politics.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. They had just finished arguing about the necessity of the current campaign overseas.

“Thank you for throwing this, Lucy,” Dinah said in a low voice. The others were deep in discussion.

“I’m happy to do so. I have one last present for you.” She took out the package, wrapped in paper from where she had left it on the other side of the settee.

“I think I know what this is!” Dinah exclaimed, tearing the brown paper off of it, to reveal the painting of the lovers. All of the others had stopped talking and were now paying close attention.

Dinah beamed at her. “Thank you. This is my absolute favourite.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And so,” Lady Violet said. “Our dear Dinah will be the first of us to be wed.”

“But not the last,” Lady Rosemary announced.

“Far from it!” Dinah agreed. “Lucy should be married before summer. And I daresay, Rosemary will be not long after.”

“I fear that I’m the only one of us without an intended,” Violet said. “Someday, I will surely find him.”

“You never know, he might be hiding in plain sight.”

Violet, Rosemary, and Susan all got up to get themselves some more tea from the table. Dinah leaned in towards Lucy.

“I have half a mind to encourage Violet to pursue Levi Wilmington,” she muttered.

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Lucy agreed. “We shall have at least two chances in the near future to ensure they are thrown together.”

“Let’s do.”

They both beamed at each other conspiratorially. The others all returned with fresh cups of tea not long after.

Lucy glanced around at all of the women gathered there. She felt welcomed by all of them. She was so happy that she had opened up to let friends both new and old into her life.

She was looking forward to Dinah's wedding, and then, in the near-distant future, to her own wedding. For once, the future was full of hope and adventure.

She certainly planned to spend her time working on her paintings and reading, but it would not be alone. Silas would be there, to love her. All of her friends would be around her. She could have both—her quiet pursuits and friendships.

Chapter 72

It was springtime in the country. Silas and Michael left Thornbridge Manor, arriving at the small church in Shere. It was built out of stone with a red tile roof. The steeple rose upward, the highest point in the whole village.

Behind it, there were the green fields and rolling hills. Not far in the distance, there were the woods. On the other side of the woods, there was Thornbridge Manor. The two brothers entered through the large wooden door.

Silas wore his very best dark blue jacket, with breeches and knee-high black boots. He handed his top hat to the usher, and then he and Michael walked to the front of the church, where they greeted the village pastor.

They both stood by the altar, looking out over those who sat in the rows of wooden pews. Silas saw all of his and Lucy's friends and loved ones there. Dinah and Lord Browning were there, as were Levi, Lady Rosemary, and Lady Violet, as well as Lucy's good friend, Susan.

The organ began, and everyone stood up. Silas' eyes went to the back of the church, where he could see Lucy standing there with her Aunt Joan, who was going to give her away.

Lucy was a vision in a simple cream-colored muslin. A blue ribbon was tied at the empire waist and her hair was arranged in a bun, with neat ringlets framing her cheeks. She held a bouquet of orange

blossoms in her hands, as well as a garland of gardenias and lilacs in her hair. She was almost exactly as he had envisioned.

Silas hadn't known that he could be even happier than he had been over the past few months. But the moment that Joan put Lucy's hand in his, he could feel it. This was where he was meant to be—at Lucy's side.

"I love you," he mouthed to Lucy.

"I love you," she mouthed back, squeezing his hands in hers.

The pastor began the ceremony. Silas' heart felt like it was swelling up with pride and joy. With every word, he kept his eyes on Lucy's.

"Do you, Silas, take Lucy to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." He had never meant two words more than he meant those.

"Do you, Lucy, take Silas to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do." She grinned at him, her voice going shaky at the end.

"Then I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss."

Silas leaned in, capturing her lips with his own as the entire church erupted into cheers. They left the church hand in hand, heading for the landau, which was to take them to their house.

It was pulled by two white horses, which Silas had recently purchased for their use. He helped Lucy up and into the carriage, then climbed in. As the carriage travelled through the village, children threw flowers into the air. Lining the road, the villagers gathered to see the bride. They both waved to everyone as they passed by.

The carriage drove all of the way to their new home, where there would be breakfast for their friends and family to celebrate. Everyone else would follow not long after.

Miss Joan and Susan and Levi were staying with them at Oak Ridge for a few weeks. Michael and Dinah and Reginald and Rosemary and Violet were staying at Thornbridge Manor. Between the two households, they had all been spending time together.

The manor at Oak Ridge was a large, newly-built sandstone house. It had four large Doric columns on the front porch, which was at the end of a circular drive with cypress trees lining the front. It was three stories, with many tall windows.

There were wide-open fields, which Silas planned to fill with horses and cows, and there were the brand-new stables that Silas had built himself to match the house that his father had built for him.

In the back, Lucy was in the process of creating the gardens. She was doing an admirable job, choosing with her artist's eye. Very soon, they would rival the gardens at Thornbridge Manor.

“Here we are,” he said, glancing around. This was even better, because his father had built the house with Silas in mind. It was a reminder that his father had loved him dearly, despite their differences. He wanted to make his father proud.

He climbed down, holding out his hand to help Lucy down. She placed her hand in his.

“Welcome home, Lady Thornbridge,” he said.

She beamed at him as she stepped down. “Why, thank you, Lord Thornbridge.”

“If only we had more time before we are beset by guests for the breakfast,” he said, looking forward to having time alone with her. He had so many plans for them—all involving being locked away in their bedchamber.

“But then, you’ll have me to yourself,” she pointed out. “All to yourself.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Together, they walked up the steps to the front door of their home.

Chapter 73

After the wedding breakfast, Lucy and Silas retired to their bedchamber. Everyone else was going to spend the day at Thornbridge Manor, where Michael was throwing a feast. They had politely declined, in favour of a more intimate dinner shared between the two of them.

Her heart was pounding. When she looked over at Silas, his eyes promised her many delights, which they had only just barely scratched the surface of. They had been able to slip off often, though they'd never consummated the relationship. They had been waiting until their wedding.

Silas closed the door, turning the key, while Lucy stood and watched him. She loved the way he moved. It was with an easy grace. He crossed the room, his eyes smouldering as he took her in. He placed a hand on her waist, leaning down to capture her lips with his. She placed her hand on his chest, feeling the flat hardness of his muscles, the soft beat of his heart.

He trailed kisses down along her neck. She closed her eyes, biting her bottom lip as she enjoyed the sensation of his lips caressing the tender skin of her neck, and the heat of his breath.

"Turn around," he murmured. She did as he ordered. He began to unbutton her dress, stopping only to kiss her at the nape of her neck, sending chills down her spine.

It was one of the most erotic moments of her life—Silas, finally undressing her all of the way. It was a surprise that they had made it to this day without going any further than they already had.

She was finally feeling confident, sure of her abilities of a sexual nature. She was learning his body as well as her own. He was always showing her new ways to enjoy herself—something that she had never known possible.

He slowly tugged the bell-like sleeves of her dress downward, and Lucy let it fall to the floor. Next, he began to unlace her corset. He knew his way around it, as she knew he would. Neither of them spoke of it. Lucy felt like she was being unwrapped. He slowly pulled it away from her body, letting it fall to the ground.

She felt arousal causing her skin to heat up as she turned towards him. His eyes feasted on her body.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered, reaching out to caress her breast, cupping it, then toying her nipple to hardness with his thumb.

“Take off your clothes,” she replied, her tone hungry. He grinned at her, moving to do as she ordered.

She watched as he removed his shirt, baring his well-formed and muscular body. She had known that he would be pleasing—she had imagined as much. She took in the sharp V of his hips, his erection, the soft downy hair that covered his body.

He reached out to her, and she stepped closer, smoothing the flat of

her palms over his smooth skin. He kissed her, holding her close, his hands on her waist. She could feel him against her, hard and hot. Her body responded.

He moved, urging her to step back towards the bed. She gladly acquiesced as he placed his hands on her hips, picking her up and then placing her on the soft silk duvet. He leaned over her, his mouth devouring hers.

Lucy's pulse raced, her hunger for him growing as his fingers began to explore her folds, teasing her. She moaned against his mouth. He pulled away, but continued to tease her with his fingers.

She knew that he was watching her. She opened her eyes, seeing the look of desire on his face.

"Do you like that?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied, closing her eyes as he ran kisses along her neck, down to her breasts, where he used his tongue to lap at her nipple. Lucy felt her body awaken at his touches. He always knew exactly what to do—as if her body was a violin and Silas was a virtuoso.

Lucy felt herself building—in the bottom of her stomach and between her legs. She panted, watching as he worked. Then, just as she was almost there, he placed his cock at her entrance, gently pushing himself inside of her. There was a brief moment of pain, and then he filled her.

Silas' eyes were on hers and he held her gaze as he began to move,

rocking so that he moved in and out. Lucy felt as though all of her senses were wide awake. With every move Silas made, that warm feeling turned into a wave, which finally reached its crest. Lucy suddenly cried out as she orgasmed. Silas slowed his motions briefly, then began to speed up. She wrapped her fingers in his hair.

His motions quickened, and she could feel him hardening inside of her. She arched her back, so that her hips ground against his. They were more connected than they had ever been. Lucy loved this new closeness—the way that they had joined together. He cried out, burying his face into her hair.

He looked at her as if she were an absolute angel, then kissed her. She felt cherished in his arms. If this were going to be the rest of her life, then it was going to be incredibly happy.

“Someday, the world is going to come looking for us,” he said.

“Then the world will have to wait. We’re not going out for a long while yet.”

They both smiled at each other. Lucy’s love for him was all-encompassing. She didn’t know if she could be even more in love with him than she currently was. He slumped over onto the bed beside her, pulling her close to him with one muscular arm. She placed her head onto his chest, listening to the gentle thump of his heart.

Epilogue

One year later

It was a bright, sunny day. Just that morning, Silas had left the hunting lodge Levi owned out on his grandfather's estate, and he'd just ridden through the tiny village of Shere. He had already been away from home for too long. In the time that they had been married, he hadn't been away from Lucy for more than a few hours.

When Levi had sent him the invitation to hunt, Silas had been fully prepared to decline, since he didn't know if he could be away from his wife for that long of a period.

However, Lucy had shooed him out, telling him that he needed to go and spend time with his friends. He knew that she would have spent the whole time he was gone painting and reading. As he had ridden through the woods beside his brother and Levi, he had contented himself with thoughts of her, deep in a steady trance as she worked, paint smudging her hands and her cheeks.

It was not long before Silas rode Black Jack along the familiar driveway to his home at Oak Ridge. He was glowing with happiness as the house came into view. When he arrived in front, he jumped down out of the saddle. He handed the reins to the groom and ran towards the front door, which opened at his approach, since he'd sent his valet ahead of him that morning.

"How was your hunting trip, My Lord?" the butler asked.

“It went well,” he replied. “Michael will send the deer that I bagged along in a little while.” Silas had left Michael at Thornbridge Manor. He and Lady Rosemary were married now, and his brother seemed content these days.

“Very good, My Lord.” The butler bowed.

“Where is Lady Thornbridge?” Usually, she came down when she heard him arrive. She wasn’t there, though he could see how she might be ensconced in a painting.

“I believe she’s out in the gardens, My Lord.”

“Thank you, Smith.”

Silas cut through the house, walking down the hall past several rooms, their doors open to allow light to spill through into the hall. He didn’t stop until he reached the back door. He stepped out and onto the terrace, which overlooked the gardens. He paused, taking in the sight before him.

Now that it was spring again, Lucy’s handiwork was in full bloom. Lush beds of flowers were everywhere, in a glorious array of yellow, red, and blue. The fruit trees were heavy with slowly ripening apples and peaches. It looked like a small slice of heaven to Silas.

He could see her, standing with her back to him. She had her easel

out, and she was taking full advantage of the spring day. Her hair was pulled back to keep it out of her eyes and she was wearing a soft blue muslin, with her smock on over it. She looked like another flower, standing there like that.

Silas began to walk towards her, his boots clicking on the flagstone path. She heard him coming, turning to face him with a brilliant grin. She set aside her paintbrush, then ran towards him the last few steps. He kissed her, wrapping his arms around her.

“Darling!” she said, her hands on his chest. “How was your trip?”

“It went well. I missed you.”

“And I you.” She beamed up at him as she tugged on the lapels of his jacket. “I have some news.”

“Oh? What is it?” He couldn’t think of what might have happened. She had been planning to take a trip to Browning to call on Dinah, a thirty-minute ride from Oak Ridge.

“I am with child.” Her hand went to her stomach, which was not yet showing any signs. Silas beheld his wife with a look of absolute love and adoration.

“Oh, Lucy,” he said, kissing her again.

“Are you pleased?” she asked.

“Very,” he said. “Every time that I think I can’t get any happier, you surprise me with more good news.” It was true. He was the luckiest gentleman in all of England. “A child!”

It was everything that they had been hoping for. Ever since they had married, they had been trying for one.

“Come,” he said, picking her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he held her, one arm under her knees, and the other around her back. “I will show you just how pleased I am.”

He carried her, giggling, into the house and up the stairs to their room, where he placed her down onto her feet. Even a year after their marriage, making love to her was exciting and new. They took their time, slowly undressing each other.

He expertly unbuttoned her dress, then pushed it down off of her shoulders. She helped him where she could, waiting while he unlaced her corset. Spinning her around to face him, he looked at her tummy, placing his hand there. He could just detect the slightest swell where their son or daughter grew, even then.

Their eyes met. He beamed, leaning in to kiss her again. He was so happy, anticipating the arrival of the newest member of their family. She began to unbutton his breeches. He pulled off his jacket and his shirt, shedding them quickly.

The sun spilled through the window and lit up her hair, making her look like she had a halo. He picked her up with ease, setting her

tenderly down onto the bed.

He pressed himself inside of her. She threw her head back, and he placed his hand on her breast. Her nipple was hard against his hand. She was perfectly formed—her skin was pale alabaster. He trailed kisses down her throat, and over her sternum.

He let himself get lost in the simple act of making love to her. He wanted to wrap himself into the soft sounds of her pleasure and the rush of love that he felt whenever he was near her.

Silas Sweet, the Viscount of Thornbridge, was deeply in love. Looking down at his wife nestled in his arms, he knew that he always would be.

THE END

Can't get enough of Lucy and Silas? Then make sure to check out the

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What will Lucy miss the most when she's far away from the city?

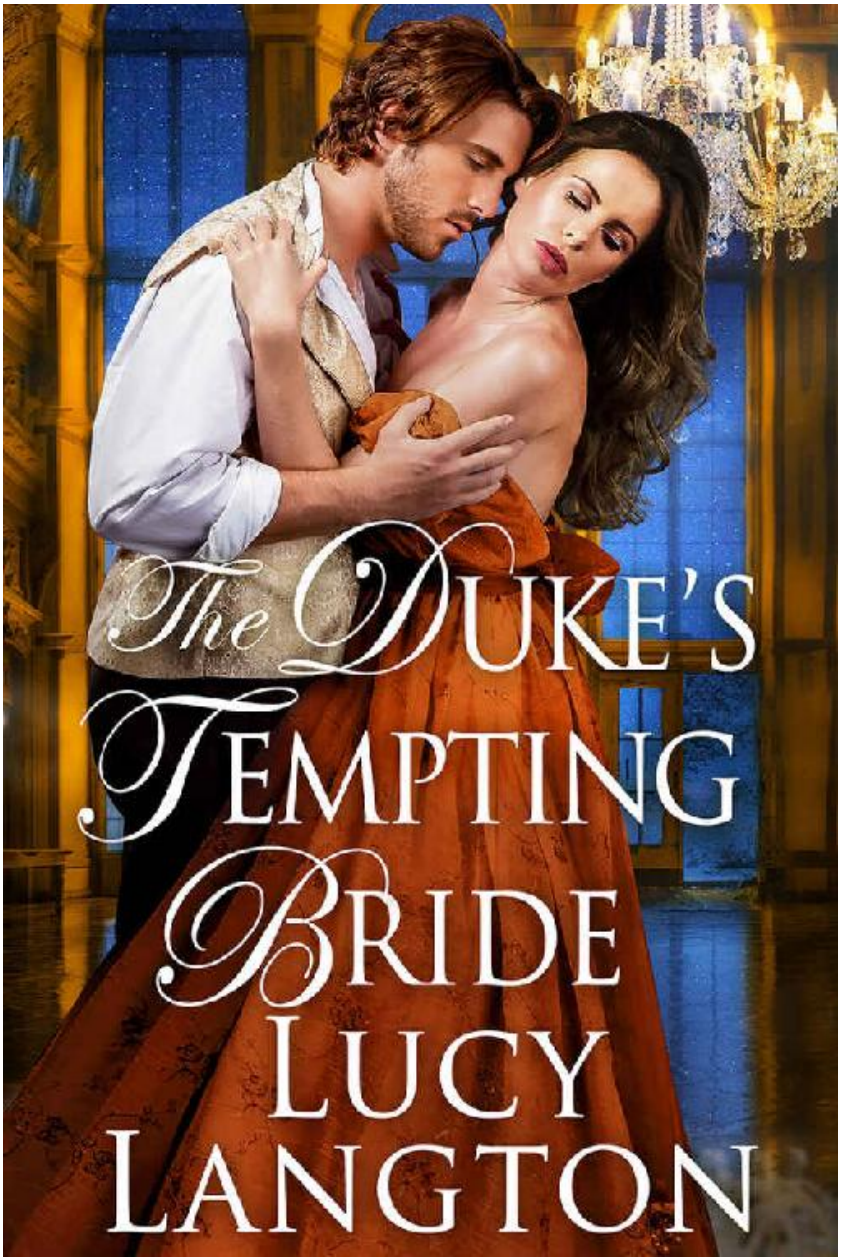
How will Lucy feel of Levi and Violet courting?

Who will finally propose to Violet and how does she feel about it?

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*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"The Duke's Tempting Bride"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


The Duke's
Tempting
Bride
Lucy
Langton

The Duke's Tempting Bride

Introduction

When his wife was mysteriously murdered, Lord Fitzwilliam Mavis, Duke of Chatham, became a young widower at the age of thirty-one. Even though he was absolved of any involvement in her death, he was socially stigmatised, living like an almost recluse for some years now. When his solitude gets too much to handle, he knows he needs to move on and find himself a wife. Destiny will bring him in front of a mysteriously seductive young lady. Could this passionate but unusual bride set his heart on fire?

Miss Diana Casey may be forced to marry the Duke to soothe her father's financial troubles, but she has no plans to fall for him. She is a rather unconventional young lady who doesn't like to be told what to do. With her ravishing body and wild passion, Diana is as innocently alluring as she is forbidden. Will there ever be anyone that will change her mind?

Their arranged marriage will prove to be more than they expected. Diana is ready to go where fate takes her, to leave everything behind, even propriety, in her desire for this handsome, honorable widower. What can an empty soul offer a tempting woman? Fitz's burning passion for Diana is undeniable, but there's still something that holds him back. Dare he offer his bruised heart as well as his body? The

answers to their questions may be found in an unlikely place: in each other's arms. Are these two fierce souls finally ready to be schooled in the art of passion?

Prelude

There was a light drizzle of rain in the air as Fitz stared down at the pine coffin lying deep in the ground. He was very unaware of the weather, along with the large group of people who had assembled to supposedly support him.

Yet, even though the many elite members of society had wished him their condolences, he could instead hear them whispering their true opinions not five feet away from him.

“Do you think the Duke killed his wife?” one softly said to the other.

“The papers say he was absolved from any involvement.”

“Then if he didn’t, then who?”

It was the same question Fitz had been asking himself ever since he found his wife stabbed to death in the garden. It had been a shocking discovery as he’d come out of the sitting room doors to join her for an afternoon picnic. The day had been perfect with clear skies and a warm breeze drifting over the pond at the front of the estate.

They’d walk the pond together, feeding the ducks day old bread. Then, they’d enjoy a picnic from the wonderful dates Cook had surprised them with. In the afternoon, he’d sup from her plump lips, enjoying the pleasures of marriage with the hopes of producing an

heir. All in all, his life had been perfect up until that dreadful moment.

Now, Fitz stood staring at what remained of his wife as the funeral came to an end and the cemetery workers began shovelling the dirt onto the pine coffin. With each thud the dirt made against the coffin, Fitz felt his heart growing colder and colder. He knew the sound would haunt his every moment for the rest of his life.

His life? Fitz wondered what the point of the rest of his life would be without the love of his life with him. He hadn't the slightest idea of why anyone would target Marian or who wanted her dead. At first, he wondered if the killer was after his fortune. But why not just hold Marian for ransom? He'd eagerly pay any kidnapper their demand if it meant having Marian back in his arms. But now that Marian was completely gone from his life, what else did he have to live for?

"Come, Fitz. You shouldn't stay out in the rain," came a female voice. Fitz had been so focused on his thoughts that he'd lost all awareness of time or the weather. He blinked and realized that it had indeed started raining. The grave in front of him had been already filled in, and he was standing very much alone.

He turned towards the voice and saw Natale standing close by. Marian's sister was a beauty as well, but where his wife had long golden hair, Natale had curly red hair from her Scottish mother. She was petite and fair, no doubt making her husband a very happy man. But now she stood near him dressed in a black mourning gown, lace covering her face from the simple hat she wore over her red hair.

"Even though it is raining, I don't very much like the idea of moving away from her," Fitz said in a low voice. Even his voice sounded different now, darker almost.

“She’s gone, Fitz. You must let her go and move on with your life,” Natale said in a soft voice as she approached him and placed her black gloved hand on his forearm. Fitz looked down at where his wife lay, and then looked at Natale, her green eyes seeming to search his.

“That’s something I’m not prepared to do,” Fitz replied. “I don’t ever want to leave her.” Natale seemed to be on the brink of tears as he looked down at her. She simply nodded her head as though she understood the pain he was feeling. Since Natale was Marian’s only living relative, perhaps her sister really did feel his pain.

“Life will never be the same without dear Marian in our lives, but she wouldn’t want us to feel this sadness. She always disliked when people weren’t well and was quick to help anyone in need,” Natale said then. “Do not let your sorrow and woe consume you.”

Fitz was doing his best to keep his emotions under control. He’d spent plenty of time lost in his sorrow as the tears never seemed to come to an end. No amount of hollowing or weeping ever seemed to be enough to make the pain go away.

When Natale opened her arms for an embrace, Fitz took the opportunity to show his appreciation to Marian’s sister. He held her in his arms for a moment, imagining that he was holding Marian for one last time. And when Fitz dropped his arms from her, he was surprised when she didn’t drop hers.

Natale placed her hands on either side of his torso and looked up at Fitz. He was confused, wondering if she was simply looking for someone to comfort her. For a moment, Fitz quickly scanned the cemetery, looking for any signs of Lord Gunther, her husband.

“You know, Fitz. If you are ever in need of comfort, you know you can always call upon me,” Natale said as she parted her lips. Fitz wasn’t sure what Natale was implying, but he didn’t want to confuse the young woman. Grief could do maddening things to anyone, and he hoped that Marian’s sister wasn’t ill from it.

Calmly and slowly, Fitz took Natale’s hands from his side and replaced them down by her side before letting go of them. He looked directly into her eyes, knowing that he had to put off any idea of him seeking comfort from her since she was a married woman.

“Natale, it’s time that we both return to our homes. Perhaps you are right, that it’s time to move on from all this sorrow. I don’t know what my life will hold for me next, but I would never do anything to tatter Marian’s memory in my mind.”

And with that, Fitz stepped away from Natale as rain slid down the front of his face. His hair was wet from standing outside in the elements for so long, and now he desired some sort of warmth for his body.

As Fitz stepped into his waiting carriage and knocked on the side of the door to signal that they should be off, he wondered if he’d ever feel whole again. His body might recover from the sudden loss of his wife, but his heart would always remain cold and closed off from any female warmth. He doubted he’d ever marry again and was sure he was now incapable of loving anyone else save for his late wife.

Chapter 1

Three years later …

Fitz was sitting in his study once again as he reviewed all the letters from his tenants and business partners. This had become a daily routine ever since he needed to find something to occupy his time. Instead of employing a solicitor, he took it upon himself to handle the daily needs of the dukedom.

Each day, he now read all the letters, made mathematical adjustments in the ledgers, reviewed his many notes, and replied to letters that needed his reply. The letters that would include personal invitations to social gatherings were discarded immediately.

Instead, he focused solely on matters of business and gain. And though his financial situation in life was extremely healthy, this task was the only thing he could think of to occupy his time, and most importantly, his mind.

The years had passed away in this manner as Fitz refused to fall into the pits of sorrow any longer. He was convinced that Marian would have not liked him to continue in that manner. Yet, he didn't feel prepared to return to the limelight of London life, either.

The period of mourning was well past, and society would demand that he remarry in order to carry on the Duke linage. With his elite position in society, there were certain responsibilities he was expected to carry out. Yet, the thought of being with another woman was an

idea that Fitz often pushed away.

Instead, Fitz had happily remained at home in the country, tending to his estate and all business matters that dealt with the Dukedom. When he didn't have important papers to review, letters to read, or responses to construct, he would leisurely walk through the estate's gardens as he kept the memory of his wife alive. On days when the weather was too wild or cold to venture outside, he'd retire to the library to become lost in a good book.

And so, this was how the days were spent for Fitz. He was content to do so and found neither pleasure nor pain in his daily activities. Instead, he was simply at peace with himself and his choices, filling the void in his heart with work and exercise.

The sound of laughing children broke through Fitz's concentration. At first, he wondered if he was simply hearing things like an echo from his past. But when the sound happened again, he could no longer ignore it and remain in his study. Fitz set down his letters of business and rose from the burgundy wing-backed chair.

He rounded the large mahogany desk and crossed the study, passing an empty fireplace and shelves lined with the history of his family. As he poked his head out of the open doorway, he peered down the main hallway of his estate till he could catch a peek at the foyer. And there, he spotted a most unexpected sight.

Running his fingers through his long, brown hair, Fitz made haste as he walked down the hallway towards the family he hadn't expected to see till the holiday season, when the upper-class families of Town would leave their townhouses in search of the warmth of their country estates. Therefore, Fitz wasn't sure why the Douglas family was at his home, and he only hoped that all was well. But as he neared the foyer, he spotted everyone in company. His best friend, Lord Michael

Douglas was accompanied by his darling wife, Lady Douglas, and their three children. All seemed to be as it should be, but that didn't answer the question of why they were all here.

"My goodness, what a pleasant surprise," Fitz spoke up as the footman helped them out of their cloaks and coats. The small children seemed to enjoy teasing the footman when the young man was only doing as instructed.

"Fitz, my dear friend. How are you these days?" Lord Douglas asked as he embraced Fitz, slapping him on the back in a boisterous way. Fitz couldn't help smiling and returning the gesture.

"My days are bright and full of joy now that you've come to pay me a visit," Fitz said as he tried to maintain his smile. He hadn't done much smiling since last he was with his best friend and accompanying family. He felt a little out of practice when it came to being joyful and a considerate host.

"You'll have to forgive me for not writing about our arrival. We were headed to Bath and wanted to surprise you for a short visit," Lord Douglas explained as he turned towards his wife. "Lady Douglas has been quite fatigued lately, and I thought a nice vacation from Town would help her condition."

"Are you sure you are not with child again?" Fitz asked with a laugh. Lady Douglas chuckled in reply as she raised her gloved hand and covered her mouth.

"It is truly possible, but I won't know for sure for some time. The idea of spending the Season away from Town sounded like the best way to relax," Lady Douglas explained.

“There I cannot fault you,” Fitz spoke then. “I have never had an aptitude for dealing with the Ton during a Season.”

“I don’t believe anyone truly can,” Lord Douglas added.

“Well then, come into the sitting room. I’ll have Mrs Stanley bring in a tea tray with some delicious tarts to help you recover from your travels. The footmen will bring in your things and I’ll have Mrs Stanley see that all your things are unpacked for your stay,” Fitz said as he gestured to the sitting room.

“Your Grace, will there be strawberry tarts?” came the voice of little Michael, Lord Douglas’ first son. Fitz couldn’t help chuckling at the adorable question the small child proposed.

“I do believe I can put in a special request for the young master,” Fitz replied to the child. “Do you suppose there might be other requests?” The children all talked excitedly as they walked into the sitting room. Fitz didn’t often occupy the space because it had been decorated by Marian herself. As they all became settled, Fitz tried to listen to what the children were looking forward to doing during their stay, but his eyes drifted around the room.

The sage coloured carpet was still plush underneath his boots. The walls had been papered from designs ordered from a French merchant. The colours of crème and emerald matched well with the carpet and the curtains that hung over the windowpanes. Thankfully they’d been opened, letting in the sun as it rose in the east.

Elegant furniture was positioned throughout the room, chairs and settees made of light oak with fabric in hues of green and blue. Marian had commented that she wanted it to feel like the gardens that were just outside the door of the sitting room. Now, all Fitz felt was the memory of finding Marian deceased right outside this room.

“Come now, children. Don’t pester the Duke with such demands,” came Lord Douglas’ voice, breaking Fitz from the memory.

“Yes, my dears,” Fitz said as he forced a smile upon his face and turned his attention to them once more. “You must instead write down all of these wonderful demands so that I might review them with my evening port and make sure they happen come morning.” The children squealed excitedly, and as Mrs Stanley came in with a tea tray with plenty of different tarts, he requested some writing paper and graphite pencils for the children to use.

“Oh dear, I think they shall become quite messy using the graphite,” Lady Douglas spoke up as she looked down at her children.

“Whether ink or graphite, they are bound to make a mess,” Lord Douglas said in a way to comfort his wife. “They are children, after all.” Fitz chuckled at the comment, thinking the children couldn’t really hurt anything. They could be washed before dinner and their clothes before morning. He always enjoyed indulging the children whenever Lord Douglas came to visit. It was the least he could do with the amount of wealth he had stored in his coffers.

The moment Mrs Stanley returned with the items, the children went to go sit around a small writing table as they began their lists with the help of Lady Douglas. Fitz always considered the woman to be a fantastic mother, and as he and Lord Douglas sat together by the large granite fireplace, he thought that she hadn’t lost her touch in lovingly guiding her children.

“How have you been these past few months we’ve been away?” Lord Douglas spoke up, bringing Fitz’s attention back to him.

“I am fine, Michael,” Fitz said, hoping to be as honest as possible. “I occupy my time with healthy behaviour, and I stay away from vices that would cause my downfall.”

“You’ve always been a reasonable man,” Lord Douglas admitted. “But you’ve seen how happy I’ve become since having children. I would wish that same happiness be felt by my best friend.” Fitz did his best to keep his composure as he looked at his friend. This line of topic always came up when Michael visited. He simply hadn’t expected it to come up so soon after just arriving.

“I like to think that marriage and children have made you a different man since Cambridge,” Fitz said, trying to avoid the conversation. “Who would have thought that the Loveless Earl would one day be a happy father.” Lord Douglas laughed openly. He no doubt remembered his schoolhouse nickname when they both attended Cambridge together and first became close friends.

“You are correct, Fitz. I had never imagined marrying when I had such ambitions for business. I turned down any female company or attempts from eligible young ladies. It was my darling that really brought the best out of me.”

Lord Douglas turned and looked at his wife then. They shared a tender look; one Fitz could remember sharing with his own wife. It was the look of mutual love and adoration that Fitz desperately missed. Though he always enjoyed when Michael came to visit him, it was like a double-edged sword. He enjoyed spending time with this family, but

the love they had for one another often reminded Fitz of what he'd lost.

The rest of the afternoon was spent eating tarts, as well as a variety of things to help the travellers recover from their journeys. As Michael had explained, the fatigue of the day eventually became too much for Lady Douglas, and she retired to her bedchamber for a short rest.

Fitz was happy to oblige the couple and took the three boys outside to play a game of hide and seek in the gardens. The young company brought new life out of Fitz, and he indulged in it, forgetting his responsibilities and the letters in his study. Instead, he focused on these short moments of joy.

Chapter 2

When the evening meal was through, and everyone was completely filled from the seven-course meal that Fitz had asked Cook to prepare for the special occasion, Lady Douglas took the children to bed. Cook, even though an older woman in her forties, was always happy to appease her master and didn't speak ill of the large, sudden task at hand.

All the servants seemed to be in higher spirits with the young family filling the halls with the sound of youthful laughter. Lord Douglas and his family were the only ones that ever paid Fitz a visit. Sometimes Marian's sister, Natale, would pay him a small visit, but those were few and far between. He wasn't even sure about Marian's only living relative anymore yet gave little concern for the thought.

With the night in full swing, Fitz sat with Michael in his study as they enjoyed their evening port. Fitz had a true smile on his face as he looked over the lists the three boys had made about fun things they'd enjoy doing during their stay.

"How long are you planning to stay before continuing west to Bath?" Fitz asked before taking a small sip of his port. He drank very little and usually only with Michael when he visited.

"A few days, at least. I want my wife to rest fully before we travel by carriage once more," Lord Douglas explained.

"Then it seems we shall go fishing tomorrow, followed by a walk

through the woods that little Madison thinks is haunted," Fitz said with a chuckle. Lord Douglas raised his eyebrows as Fitz handed over the youngest boy's paper. As the father read his son's note, he couldn't help laughing boisterously, causing Fitz to join him.

"I have no idea why he'd think of the woods of Chatham are haunted," Lord Douglas said once his mirth had subsided. "The imagination of young children." Fitz took the note back. He was excited to treat the three young boys, for it had been some time since he'd been fishing. Always Lord Douglas brought his family in the fall or winter months, but during the spring months, they had many more options to plan fun outings.

"You have always been good with children," Lord Douglas spoke up. "The excitement I see on your face as you talk to my boys and the way you are now, planning these outings. You could truly out beat me as a doting father." Fitz gave his friend a pleasant smile as he set the notes aside. He couldn't disagree with his friend, but he also didn't want to agree. That would require him to remarry, and that was something he hadn't thought about since the funeral.

"They are good boys," Fitz offered, thinking that it was simply his duty as a humble host to show his guests a pleasant time. "There will come a day, sooner than expected, when the boys will be old enough to begin their studies. They should have a memorable childhood."

"It is more than that, Fitz," Lord Douglas said in a pleading voice. "I know you are not keen on this subject, but in order to have children of your own, you must consider remarrying."

Fitz fixed his eyes on his friend, trying not to say or do anything to put him off. He didn't want to anger Michael or upset him in any way. He was his only friend, and he didn't want to lose him, too. But he also couldn't agree with Michael. Though he'd longed for a large

family with plenty of children to raise, that dream had vanished along with Marian.

"Though I can at least agree to the idea of having children and becoming a father, the thought of returning to Town to attend a Season is what keeps me rooted at home," Fitz confessed. He disliked Town because it was often overbearing and unrealistic.

At least in the country, he didn't have to worry about what other people thought about him or deal with any rumours circulating about him. Far away from Town, he didn't have to worry about high society and all of their social functions.

"Then do things the traditional way. Agree to an arranged marriage if only to produce an heir and keep the Mavis family line alive. Then, you'll have someone to be the Duke of Chatham when you pass away. It will be someone you've raised and taught, and not just some random Earl who's persuaded the King to choose for your successor," Lord Douglas suggested.

"Come now, Michael. Surely, you'd like the dukedom for yourself to pass on to one of your sons. After all, you can only have one heir," Fitz said with a smirk.

"That is my only fear as the father of three boys and an earl. That one day they'll fight over my title," Lord Douglas said with a sigh. "I wish they could stay small forever and I shall become immortal." It was Fitz's turn to laugh boisterously, thinking that only a truly loving father would say such a thing.

"Well then. Let's hope that if I do ever remarry that I shall produce three daughters so that our two families might become joined and no

one shall need to fight for anything," Fitz said once his laughter had died down once more.

"I agree that it would surely do the trick," Lord Douglas said. "But seriously, Fitz. You could have an arranged marriage with a young lady of decent birth and connections. Someone pleasant enough not to cause you any more trouble than she's worth. And when you have a carriage full of your own children, it shall all become worth it to you in the end if only to have the joy you have with my boys in your daily life."

"And to whom do you suppose I should write to make such an arrangement?" Fitz asked, thinking that this plan would be of no use to him. It almost seemed as terrible as the idea of going to Town for a Season.

"Write to the lords in your own area," Lord Douglas said with a shrug of his shoulders. "You have a decent neighbourhood with at least a dozen worthy families. Write to those you are already familiar with, who are close by, and enquire of which lords have eligible daughters. Be plain and frank, that you seek a wife to carry on your lineage. No one would dare say anything against that borne responsibility."

Fitz thought about Michael's words for a moment. It was a feasible and logical plan. It was an idea that had been used time and time again to secure strong family lines. And though it would probably appear strange that he was writing to these lords after very little communication over the last few years, perhaps they would overlook that little fact for the prospect of marrying their daughter to a very wealthy duke.

"My position in society makes me a very eligible gentleman. I doubt this task would be very difficult from my position. It depends on the number of eligible young ladies in the area," Fitz spoke, trying to see

this as a matter of business instead of a personal matter.

Perhaps if he kept to this line of thinking then he might be able to produce an heir without becoming emotional attached to the woman. He couldn't risk another heartbreak if something were to happen to his second wife.

"That is the correct way to look at it," Lord Douglas said with a nod. "Any father would be eager to have you as a son-in-law. You shall either have every lord in the area knocking on your door, or, you'll discover for yourself if there is a lack of eligible young ladies in this area."

Fitz could only nod as he looked back down at the notes the young boys had written. He was still eager to spend the following day with them, doing things that used to bring him so much joy. He liked the idea of having children of his own to one day spend days like that with.

He'd teach them all sorts of things, from fishing to how to ride a horse. Fitz very much liked the idea of this, even though he almost loathed the idea of marrying and having to bed a woman he could not love. *Perhaps it was all for the better that I never fall in love again*, Fitz thought as he settled on his decision.

"When you leave for Bath, I will construct these letters to the lord I know of in the neighbourhood. I shall then write to you if I have any success in the matter," Fitz announced. Lord Douglas smiled brightly as he picked up his glass of port and held it in the air.

"To the future Duchess of Chatham and all the children you shall one day have," Lord Douglas toasted as he leaned his head back and

downed his drink. Not wanting to be rude, Fitz took a sip from his own glass. Even with the decision made, he did not feel excited about it like he did about spending the day fishing with the young boys. He didn't want to dread the idea either, not wanting to become a disrespectful husband. He understood that couples were married all the time through arranged marriages and lived decent lives. He understood that love wasn't always present in some marriages. But having experienced a deep connection with Marian, he knew of the possibilities. Now he needed to come to terms with his sense of duty over his heart's wants to finally be healed.

"Since I want you to succeed, Fitz, I advise you to write to all lords in the area regardless of rank. Though it would be most acceptable to marry a young lady in close rank as yourself, I think that rank is not as important as finding a suitable young lady to be your bride," Lord Douglas spoke up.

Fitz thought about the idea for a moment and eventually stood from his desk and made his way over to a bookshelf. There, he pulled a small notebook from the shelf and returned to his chair. He opened it before Michael and showed him the list inside.

"My father always kept a list of families that occupied the area. I've tried to keep up with it, but have been lacking these last few years since I've not been very social," Fitz admitted. "I shall use this list to construct my letters."

"Perhaps you should make an enquiry before you construct your list. What if you don't have everyone?"

"Then I shall include in my letters enquiries as well. If a lord doesn't have an eligible daughter, then he may reply with at least a reference of whom I should contact next."

“That is surely an idea.” Michael looked back down at the book, running his finger down the line of family names. “Well, you certainly have a good place to start with.”

“I can agree with that,” Fitz said as he closed the book and set it to the side of his desk. “It’s a beginning, for sure.”

“Then let us retire for the night. You’ll need all the energy you can muster to deal with the boys tomorrow.” Fitz smirked then as he rose from his chair with his friend and left the study. He couldn’t deny that fact at all.

As Fitz readied for bed, he couldn’t help thinking about the proposition he was about to enter into. He would agree to marry a young lady in return for having children. She would be well taken care of, and though Fitz wouldn’t be able to love her, he would make sure she remained happy during her days. He knew how to be a dutiful husband and provide for one’s needs. He only hoped that whomever he agreed to marry wouldn’t expect anything more than he could monetarily give.

It was only when Fitz laid down in bed that he started to feel anything more than the numbness he normally kept around his heart. There was a sense of fear that stole through him at the idea of bringing someone other than Marian to his bed.

Though he’d come to terms with her being gone, he hadn’t put any thought into marrying again. And now that he’d agreed to do so to Michael, if only to have children of his own, Fitz was filled with the uncertainty of whether or not he could go through with it. After all, he’d never discovered who had killed Marian and why.

Chapter 3

Miss Diana Casey was sitting in the drawing room of her father's small country estate. Before her was the ledger that she kept detailed and accurate notes in. Every morning, she reviewed the notes from the day before, much like she was doing now, trying to find anywhere upon the lines where she could make an adjustment and stretch their money a little further.

Being the youngest of five children, Diana had come to learn much about life from a very young age. Both her parents were much older now, relying on Diana for most things in life when it came to the daily running of the household, as well as managing the small estate of a marquess. That was why Diana was currently in charge of the family's budget because her parents could no longer see the fine print upon the pages with much clarity.

She was also the only child that hadn't tried to completely ruin her parents or take advantage of them. And though all four of her older siblings were now married into wealthy families, none of them would answer her frequent pleas for financial assistance.

Therefore, it was up to Diana to stretch ever shilling they had left. Her father's coffers were almost empty, forcing Diana to let go of most of the servants. All that remained was their loyal housekeeper and a modest Cook. The rest was left to Diana to manage.

Though she was a proper lady, she'd been forced to learn how to keep the house clean, wash laundry, and even mend clothes under the guidance of Mrs Merriweather, their housekeeper. The older woman was a godsend and one of the few people helping Diana keep the

household together.

Diana read over each line, counting the days till the next payment would be sent from Town based on her father's monthly earnings from his title. Her father had very little tenants left, and their land had only shrunken more and more when her older brother demanded their father's title. The man had yet to claim it but had taken their father's greatest resources instead.

Diana was doing her best not to let her mind wander down an angry road. But every time she looked at the ledger, she couldn't help remembering how each of her siblings had done something to hurt their parents financially.

Diana didn't know how much longer she and her parents would be able to reside in their country estate. The townhouse had already been claimed by another sibling, therefore going to Town was not an option anymore. There were no other relatives that would take them in once they had financial ruin. And even if Diana began to do all the chores and errands, even letting go of Mrs Merriweather and Cook, they would eventually run out of money to even purchase food.

"What terrible luck," Diana said softly as she closed the ledger. She slid it back in its position on her writing desk before she folded up the compartment, using the key that she kept tucked away in her sleeve to lock it up tight. She was just about to join her parents for the afternoon meal when Michelle came bounding into the sitting room with a happy smile on her face.

"Miss Bradly, what a wonderful surprise," Diana said as she stood and embraced her dear friend. Though the young woman was the daughter of the village's baker, Diana wasn't one to judge a person based on their rank but instead on how they treated other people. Michelle was the kindest person she'd ever met and often brought day-old bread to

her home for them to use.

“I’ve already given Cook the bread I managed to take from the bakery, but it is not the reason I came,” Michelle said as she gestured towards the settee in the room. Diana then sat down with her as Michelle rubbed her hands together eagerly.

“Alright then, what is the true reason for your visit?” Diana asked, willing to entertain Michelle. Since the young woman worked in the village, and at a very popular bakery, Michelle was prone to all sorts of gossip. Diana could only assume that her unexpected visit was based on such sort of news.

“Miss Margret, the assistant to the cook over at Lord Dillon’s manor, came in this morning to pick up her normal order of sourdough bread and told me how her master received a letter from the Duke of Chatham. It seems Lord Mavis is in search of a wife and is sending letters to all the lords in the area for an eligible young lady to be his bride,” Michelle said in an excited voice as she clapped her hands together.

Diana frowned as she took time to remember who the Duke of Chatham was. Since she was only nineteen and hadn’t spent a Season in Town since her parents couldn’t dream of beginning to afford it, Diana hadn’t had much experience with high society or the Ton. At first, she could not remember knowing a Lord Mavis.

“Forgive me, Miss Bradly, but I don’t have a memory of ever meeting Lord Mavis,” Diana admitted.

“He’s the Duke that lives on the northern side of the neighbourhood. I suppose you’ve never met him before because he lost his wife about

three years ago and hasn't really been seen since," Michelle explained. At the mentioning of this, Diana thought she remembered something about a gentleman who had become a widow.

"Is this the man whose wife was murdered?" Diana asked, trying to piece the memory back together.

"Precisely," Michelle said as her eyes grew wide. "That's what makes this news so bazaar. The Duke is looking for a wife and is willing to enter into an arranged marriage."

"My goodness, what for?" Diana wondered.

"No doubt to continue the family line. You know how those upper-class lords are only worried about heirs and such," Michelle said in a dissatisfied tone. "And with such a title, I'm sure he'll get plenty of requests from eager fathers wanting their daughters to marry well."

"There is too much mystery surrounding the man to really make a certain guess as to why he is in want of a wife," Diana decided upon. "There is no telling from a man no one has heard about for years."

"I'm excited to hear whom he'll end up marrying. There are not that many young ladies who could fit the bill," Michelle said. "I believe this will be the most exciting news of the year."

"Come now, Miss Bradly. I don't really think this line of topic should occupy our time. It's a strange circumstance that I should certainly not have time to care about. A Duke would never consider a poor young lady such as myself, no matter the desire or need to have a wife."

Diana looked away from Michelle then and instead at her hands as they clenched together in her lap.

It was wrong of her to complain because she knew that Michelle's wealth depended on the success of the bakery. Furthermore, Diana was a proper young lady while Michelle was born into a much lower class than even she.

"You never know what might happen," Michelle said as she reached across the settee and placed her hand gently on Diana's. "Things won't always be as they are now. As my mama has always told me, all things in life are temporary." Diana forced a smile to her lips as she looked back up at Michelle. Michelle was truly a splendid friend, and she was lucky to have such a friend in her life.

"I have just finished going over the ledger once more, and it has only caused my fears and worries to increase. I feel as though I could count the days until we are without a single income."

"It's hard for me to believe that not a single married child of your parents has done anything to help out. Do you not think that you should write to them again, explaining in detail your troubles?"

Diana shook her head, thinking that it had done no good before then. But as Michelle squeezed her hand once more, she knew that she shouldn't ever give up hope.

"I will write to all four of them once more. Perhaps this time someone will come to our aid," Diana finally said. "But now I must really get to the housework and see that my parents are comfortable. I'm as equally afraid for their health as I am about our financial situation."

Michelle rose from the settee as she helped Diana to her feet. “Do let me know if there is anything else I can assist with. I know I don’t have as much as you, but I will still help if I can.”

“Your friendship means more to me than you could ever fathom. It is all I need in life,” Diana said with a genuine smile on her face. Michelle beamed at her in return before she dipped her head and curtsied.

“I will be returning to the village as well. Enjoy the day,” Michelle said as she straightened her posture once more. “And if I hear any more about this mysterious duke, I’ll be sure to let you know.” Diana couldn’t help chuckling as she escorted Michelle to the front of the house. She saw her off before turning and making her way towards the drawing room. It was there she found her parents being tended to by Mrs Merriweather.

“We missed you for the afternoon meal,” Lady Casey said as she looked up once Diana came into the room.

“Forgive me, Mother. I was busy with the ledger, and Miss Bradly from the village came to pay me a visit,” Diana explained as she sat next to her mother.

“I’m sure she was full of all sorts of gossip,” Lady Casey said with a chuckle. Diana couldn’t disagree with her and instead placed her hand over her mouth as though to say her lips were sealed.

Diana’s father sat across from them, rummaging through the daily post. Diana knew that her father couldn’t read the letters very well

anymore, but she wouldn't put him to shame by saying so out loud.

She'd let him try to read whatever letters had come for him that day, and in the evening, she would review them and explain them to her father after her mother had retired for the evening. Most of them would be notices of past due payments, but Diana wouldn't worry about them until that evening.

"I left a plate of boiled eggs and cheese on the table for you, Miss Casey. Would you like me to bring it into the drawing room for you?" Mrs Merriweather asked.

"That would be lovely, thank you," Diana replied.

"Aren't we blessed to have such a wonderful housekeeper?" Lady Casey commented. "She has been such a loyal servant all these years. I feel like it was just yesterday she came to work for us when Gabriel was born."

The mentioning of her eldest brother made her cringe, but Diana did her best not to show any signs of distaste towards her older siblings. Her parents often always saw the good in people and couldn't even fault their children for their abandonment of them. Diana, on the other hand, knew in her heart that she'd never feel any love towards her siblings like she once did as a child.

"I agree that Mrs Merriweather is an invaluable housekeeper," Lord Casey spoke up just as the woman was returning to the drawing room. She smiled happily as she handed Diana the plate of food. She thanked her in return and waited for the woman to depart before speaking up again.

“It is her loyalty that has really been our saving grace,” Diana commented. “I could not do the work I do without her.”

Silence filled the room then as Diana ate the meagre meal. Lady Casey seemed to be drawn away by her deep thoughts. Diana would sneak glances at her mother, observing her hair that used to flow in golden curls down her back.

Now, it was braided grey hair that framed her ageing face. Her father, on the other hand, still had his luscious brown hair that seemed to be untouched by age. Since Diana shared his hair colour, she also hoped that she’d have his longevity. Sometimes it made Diana wonder if her mother had aged a bit faster than her father since he still had youthful tones about him.

By the time Diana had finished eating, she knew that it was time she finally started working around the house. She didn’t like to delay too long when it came to the housework because she knew how quickly it could pile up. Diana would have never known the effort it took to keep a small household clean and tidy. But ever since her father had imparted on her the news that their fortunes were rather low, Diana had stepped up to make sure that everything was taken care of for as long as she remained a single woman.

Diana rose from the settee and dipped her head towards her parents as she said, “Enjoy the afternoon. I have some things to take care of.”

“Very well, my dear,” Lord Casey said as he tried hard to read a letter from where he sat next to the fireplace. Diana loathed any thoughts of the colder months when a fire would need to be tended to. She wasn’t sure if they could afford the wood to keep warm, and that would only be a larger strain on her parents.

Diana forced her thoughts away from their troubles as she left the drawing room and went towards the kitchen. There, she placed her dirty plate in the dry sink before bidding Cook a warm greeting and then making her way upstairs to tend to the laundry. As she went, she thought about what Michelle had spoken of earlier, of the Duke in search of a wife. She still found the idea rather mysterious because she did not know anything about the Duke besides the death of his late wife. She couldn't fathom why he'd want a wife and thought that if she ever met the man that perhaps she would discover all his mysteries.

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